

The New Criterion

January 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments:

January 2004

Life at the MLA

The jury is still out in the great contest for the most discredited academic organization in America. The contenders are many. The competition is fierce. Almost every discipline in the humanities and social sciences has fielded an impressive team. Anyone who has attended an annual meeting of the College Art Association knows how adept many academic art historians have become at substituting hermetic sermons about race, class, gender, and other items on the agenda of cultural politics for any concern with the substance of art. The American Historical Association has done yeoman's work as well, often transforming the study of history into an ideological battleground. Ditto professional organizations for anthropology and sociology. And of course "Women's Studies" and kindred pseudo-disciplines have been producing stunning performers for decades now.

No one questions the obvious commitment to grievance-mongering and obfuscation displayed by these organizations. Nor can anyone seriously gainsay their remarkable talent for political hectoring, on the one hand, and intellectually nugatory faux-scholarship, on the other. We freely acknowledge all that. Nevertheless, when it comes to awarding the palm for betraying an intellectual legacy, consistency and stamina—the ability to compete true to

form year in and year out—count as much as momentary awfulness or isolated star players. And considered from this long-term perspective, no organization has performed so badly for so long as the Modern Language Association, the largest and most risible organization of academics in the country.

The end of December is not only Kwanzaa-time but also the time when most academic fraternities gather to confabulate, filling one or more large hotels or convention centers with their vaporings, job offers, and sundry bits of professional business. It has been nearly ten years since we forswore the annual meetings of the MLA: "Enough," we said after that last experience, "is enough."

Since then, we have given the MLA a wide berth. Every now and then, however, we get news of its doings. Just recently, a conscientious reader sent us parts of the most recent MLA Newsletter. Of particular interest were the "Proposals for the 2003 Delegate Assembly Meeting." Four of the five proposals were submitted "on behalf of the Radical Caucus in English and Modern Languages." None had anything to do with the study of literature. The one proposal not submitted on behalf of the Radical Caucus concerned itself with the unionization of graduate teaching assistants at Yale.

The other proposals were pretty much all of piece. One asked that the MLA urge “the repeal of the U.S.A. Patriot Act.” Another wanted the MLA to deplore “government war-making projects” and urge “the withdrawal of troops and reallocation of funds to reverse inattention to, and grave deficits in, funding of education and other human services.” A third had to do with pay for graduate students, teaching assistants, and adjunct faculty. The remaining proposal is worth quoting in full.

Whereas in wartime, governments commonly shape language to legitimate aggression, misrepresent policies, conceal aims, stigmatize dissent, and block critical thought; and

Whereas distortions of this sort proliferate now, as in the use of the phrase “war on terrorism,” to underwrite military action anywhere in the world, against whomever our government sees as opponents; and

Whereas we are professionals committed to scrupulous inquiry into language and culture;

Be it resolved that the Modern Language Association supports its members in conducting critical analysis of war talk, in public forums and, as appropriate, in classrooms.

A great deal could be said about this passage—especially by someone really (as distinct from merely verbally) “committed to scrupulous inquiry into language and culture.” Consider, for example, the deflationary scare-quotes around the phrase “war on terrorism”: exactly what degree of skepticism are we to infer from these instruments of equivocation? Do the authors of this proposal doubt that terrorism is a worldwide problem or that the United States is committed to combatting it by every means possible, including military means? Again: what evidence is brought forward for the sweeping indictments handed down in these few sentences? Who says that the enumerated “distortions . . . proliferate now”? In what sense, if any, has dissent been “stigmatized”?

Isn’t the Radical Caucus freely engaged in high-profile dissent within a prominent academic professional body? How has our government “misrepresented” its policies? On the contrary, has not the Bush administration been clear as daylight about its intentions? What evidence is there that the habit of critical thought has been “blocked”—besides, we mean, the evidence of such Pavlovian responses on the part of institutions like the MLA?

A useful essay might be written about the political misuse of language, taking this proposal as an illustration. But odious though the rhetoric and assumptions of the proposal are, perhaps the most disturbing thing about it is the resolution: that the MLA should support members who undertake “critical analysis”—read: ideological indoctrination—in “public forums and, as appropriate, in classrooms.” In other words, the writers of this proposal are asking for an official imprimatur to employ the classroom as a left-wing, anti-American propaganda machine. Will the MLA hierarchy oblige? By the time you read this, the answer will be known. In practical terms, it hardly matters, since many classrooms supposedly devoted to the study of literature are already given over at least partly to political sermonizing. But in a larger sense, the MLA’s capitulation on this issue would be one more evidence of its subordination of literary issues to politics—one more evidence, that is, of its intellectual and moral bankruptcy.

Another judicial outrage

Sometimes it’s the little things that make big issues snap into focus. Any sentient adult, beholding the spectacle of the increasingly imperious American judiciary, has cause to worry. Where will the usurpation of the democratic process stop? Robert H. Bork has done heroic work exposing the way politically correct, academic leftism has

transformed the American judiciary from an institution whose aim is to *uphold* and *apply* the law into an institution whose aim is to *make* the law. In many essays (including essays for *The New Criterion*) as well as in *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (1997) and *Coercing Virtue: The Worldwide Rule of Judges* (2003), Judge Bork has provided an eloquent if depressing portrait of a judiciary intoxicated by hubris and therefore party to what Tocqueville called democratic despotism.

Judge Bork deals with many large issues—abortion, race relations, homosexual “marriage”—in his writings about the imperial judiciary. But a recent item in *The San Francisco Chronicle* reminds us that the long arm of the judiciary is meddling in the daily life of local communities on a whole host of quotidian subjects. We write as the Christmas season reaches its apogee. It’s the rare town hall or school hall that can get away with any overt homage to Christmas—the ACLU, abetted by a squadron of lawyers and sympathetic judges, spoor like bloodhounds in search of any display or behavior that might be construed as violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. The fact that saying a prayer in school or exhibiting a crèche on town property is regarded as contravening the edict that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” shows what immense hermeneutical ingenuity is lavished on emasculating religion and excluding it from the public square.

It’s a curious thing, though, that the ACLU, et al., get worked up decidedly more about the public display or practice of some religions than others. Thus the *Chronicle* for December 12, on page A2 informed readers that “A federal judge says a Contra Costa County [California] school was merely teaching seventh-graders about Islam, not indoctrinating them, in role-playing ses-

sions of a history class.” A teacher named Brooke Carlin required students to

adopt roles as Muslims for three weeks. . . . She encouraged them to use Muslim names, recited prayers in class, required students to recite a line from a prayer and made them give up something for a day, such as television or candy, to simulate fasting during Ramadan. On the final exam, students were asked for a critique of elements of Muslim culture.

So, while school children across the country are deprived of the Our Father and the Pledge of Allegiance (“one nation under God”: we can’t have that now, can we?), it is just dandy that teachers in Contra Costa County, California, require students to spend three weeks—*three weeks*, mark—pretending to be Muslims. As Richard Thompson, president and chief counsel for the Thomas More Law Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, observed, this episode was a flagrant example of “religious indoctrination” and one, moreover, which showed “a double standard, one for the Christians and one for the other religions.” It’s another step down the vertiginous path of moral relativism: all opinions are equal, but any opinion hailing from the accumulated wisdom of Western civilization is less worthy of respect than opinions from anywhere else in the world. It is nice work if you can get it.

The media and Iraq

On December 10 of last year, a couple of days before the capture of Saddam Hussein, thousands of pro-democracy Iraqis marched in various cities to protest the continuing outbreaks of terrorist activity. It was, noted one Iraqi blogger, “probably the largest demonstration in Baghdad for months. It wasn’t just against terrorism. It was against Arab media, against the interference of neighboring countries, against dictatorships, against Wahhabism, against oppression, and of course against the Ba’ath and

Saddam.” For most of us, this would be big news. Here the “mainstream” media had been telling us for months that things were going badly in Iraq. We were losing the peace. It was a “quagmire.” The people were against the U.S. military. But wait, here are a spate of demonstrations *for* peace, *for* the liberation of Iraq, *for* the rule of law. Banner headlines, no?

No indeed. CNN, continuing its policy of strict evenhandedness—the Bush administration is in the wrong *even if* it turns out it was right—had three main headlines on its web site that morning: two different stories bore the same headline: “Iraqi civilian deaths ‘avoidable.’” The third headline read “Center of U.S. operations in Baghdad attacked.” In other words, all the bad news all the time.

Speaking of Saddam . . .

One indisputable bit of good news—or so one might have thought—was the capture of Saddam Hussein on December 13. Actually, news of Saddam’s capture was met by considerable wailing and gnashing of teeth among many disaffected Democrats, including Howard Dean who just managed to mumble that he supposed it was “a good thing.” Within an hour or two of Saddam’s being dragged out of his spider hole, there were cries that the U.S. had “humiliated” the poor man. Cardinal Renato Martino, a “top Vatican official,” criticized the U.S. military for airing footage of Saddam being examined by doctors. “I felt pity to see this man destroyed,” the Cardinal said, “[the military] looking at his teeth as if he were a cow. They could have spared us these pictures.” Maybe. For our part, we think those images sent a salutary message to the Arab world: dictators who rape, torture, and murder hundreds of thousands of people, who enrich themselves on the backs of a starving populace, are likely to wind up scurrying from dirt hole to dirt hole before being deloused and publicly examined by an

army doctor. What, we wonder, does His Eminence object to in that message?

In the weeks and months that come, one of the chief questions will be what to do with Saddam. Who should try him? Naturally, *The New York Times*, the BBC, and almost the entire Democrat establishment shout with one voice and one heart: “an international tribunal.” After all, the U.N. has already failed Iraq for more than a decade, why shouldn’t it go on doing so? For our part, we believe Saddam’s fate should be ultimately decided by the people he tyrannized for more than three decades, the Iraqis. Many people seem to have become suddenly tender-hearted on the subject of Saddam. What about his rights? Must be sure the poor chap isn’t brutalized. We thought William F. Buckley, Jr. had the last word on this subject. In a recent column, Mr. Buckley wrote that

the very idea that Saddam Hussein needs the niceties of Blackstone’s laws prescribing judicial procedure and the means of protecting the innocent is a surrender to epistemological pessimism: the notion that you can’t ever really prove anything. Built into that nihilist surrender is doubt about first principles. If there is anybody in town who believes that Saddam Hussein is not guilty of crimes however described, what we need to worry about is him, not Saddam. . . .

It isn’t to ask for lynch law or even for victor’s justice to say simply: This is a man, finally apprehended, who killed by the thousands and tortured his country, committing genocide north and south. His “trial” should be of the order we’d have given to Adolf Hitler if he had been taken alive. Exhibit him, make him dwell on what he has done, satisfy the Iraqi people that we share their concern, and that having dispatched an army to their country to contain and disarm him, we will back the Iraqi court that sends him to the gallows.

To which we say, Amen.

Expensive illiterates: victimhood & education

by Mark Steyn

A dictatorship—even a one-man psycho state—can appear surprisingly normal on the surface. For much of Saddam Hussein’s long reign, enough brand-name Western enterprises were willing enough to do business with him that parts of downtown Baghdad at first glance have the same multinational blandness as any other capital city. In the outlying towns, the Main Streets have a healthy commercial life, granted that many of them are made up of competing convenience stores lined up side-by-side with the same stacks of the same sweltering soda hot enough to boil a lobster. The residential streets can look quite pleasant, if you don’t mind the garbage piled up in the yard—nothing to do with Rumsfeld’s destruction of the infrastructure, just a reflection of the relatively low priority municipal services had in Baathist Iraq. The hospitals, despite the alleged humanitarian catastrophe the country’s engulfed by (according to the NGOs), are clean, relatively efficient, and uncrowded.

So, when I was driving around western and northern Iraq last year, I made a point in every town I visited of dropping by the local school. A totalitarian state can mimic a free society in much of its civic landscape, but not in the classroom. The first thing you notice is the rectangles of unfaded paint on the walls. This is where the portraits of Saddam once hung. They’ve all been taken down, freeing up rather more space than anyone knows what to do with. A big pile

of frames sat on one principal’s desk. “I thought we could re-use these,” he told me. “But I don’t have anything to put in them.”

He was anxious to tell me what I wanted to hear. To get anywhere in Iraq’s education system, you had to be a member of the Baath Party, which means that any teacher with experience in Iraq is either someone who joined the party because that was the only way he could fulfill his passionate commitment to the education of Iraq’s youth or someone who joined the party because, if you’re one of the dimmer Saddamite enforcers, bullying the rest of the staff at some no-account grade school was one of the less demanding jobs. It was hard to discern into which category the various teachers I met fell. Even when they complained that they were no longer allowed to teach the war with Iran and the Gulf War as glorious Iraqi victories, this could have been either ideological bias or mere ignorance (and, in fairness, the Gulf War *was* a glorious Iraqi victory, in the sense that, as many of us came to see, anything that left Saddam in power could not reasonably be defined as a defeat).

Nonetheless, every teacher I ran into had done his or her duty and either torn out Saddam’s pictures from the textbooks or put an X across them, in compliance with deBaathification procedures. To give me a sense of what the books used to look like, a nine-year-old boy in Ramadi showed me his “Patriotic Education” reader from the

previous year. Like me in my day, he was evidently prone to a little classroom boredom, and the various scenes of Iraqi life were augmented by the usual schoolboy doodles and marginalia. But every page bearing a picture of the great leader remained utterly unblemished: even an absent-minded grade-schooler knows there are some things not to be absent-minded about.

Whatever the nominal subject, in practice it boiled down to the glorification of Saddam. In a first-grade reader, Hassan and Amal—the equivalent of America’s Dick and Jane or Britain’s Janet and John—hold their portraits and explain the benefits of an Iraqi education:

“O come, Hassan,” says Amal. “Let us chant for the homeland and use our pens to write, ‘Our beloved Saddam.’”

“I come, Amal,” says Hassan. “I come in a hurry to chant, ‘O, Saddam, our courageous president, we are all soldiers defending the borders for you, carrying weapons and marching to success.’”

At first, you think this is just a little light propagandist warm-up to kick-start the day. Then you figure, oh, well, it just impacts their take on the Baathist era, Saddam’s rise, etc. But pretty soon you realize it infects everything: Iraqis were not allowed to learn that the mighty Saladin was a Kurd because Saddam, as part of his appropriation of Islam’s glories, claimed to be his descendant.

And now Iraqi schools are re-joining the real world—or, at any rate, a mildly less unreal world: I noticed the giant picture of a brave Iraqi crushing a soldier from the Zionist Entity underfoot hadn’t been taken down. A schoolroom is the place at which the state makes plain the range of its ambitions—either (as in Iraq) to create a bizarre alternative universe in the hopes that its young charges will be unable to see it for the prison it is, or (as in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Arab world) to disdain education for a toxic ideology of blame and victimhood that renders its graduates in-

capable of functioning in a modern democratic state.

For example, the Alexandria Library recently opened a manuscript museum, funded by the Egyptian and Italian governments and UNESCO. Its centerpiece is a display of the three holy books of the monotheist religions—i.e., the Torah, the Bible and the Koran. But the museum director, Dr. Yousef Ziedan, decided to display alongside the Torah a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. “When my eyes fell upon the rare copy of this dangerous book, I decided immediately to place it next to the Torah,” he told the Egyptian weekly *Al-Ushu*. “Although it is not a monotheistic holy book, it has become one of the sacred [tenets] of the Jews, next to their first constitution, their religious law, [and] their way of life.”

Iraqis were not allowed to learn that the mighty Saladin was a Kurd because Saddam, as part of his appropriation of Islam’s glories, claimed to be his descendant.

He then went on to reassure his interviewer that it was not six million Jews but only one million who died in the Holocaust. “In reality,” he said, “an analysis of samples from the purported gas chambers has proven that these were sterilization chambers, without a sufficient quantity of cyanide to kill.” Whether or not denial is a river in Egypt, Holocaust denial certainly is. And, if we’re honest, most of us aren’t in the least bit surprised to discover that in Egypt a distinguished man, a scholar, a trustee of the nation’s heritage, a teacher of historical truth, is, to use the technical term, nuts.

If you’re in an Iraqi school, you learn of Iraq’s victory over Iran in their long war. If you’re in a Saudi school, you learn that the Jews use the blood of Muslim children for their religious ceremonies. If you’re in a Palestinian Authority school, you learn that

the most glorious aspiration any child can have is to grow up to be a suicide bomber. If you're in a Syrian school, you study geography from maps which do not show one of your neighboring states.

Now let us return from the Middle East, and visit an American grade school. How about, say, Madison School in Skokie, Illinois? Not for the annual celebrations of Saddam's birthday, but for as close as we get to a local equivalent—say, Thanksgiving 2003. As *The Chicago Tribune* reported:

A group of Skokie 1st graders got an unexpected lesson in cultural sensitivity Friday when their principal wouldn't let them dress as American Indians for their annual Thanksgiving celebration.

After a parent complained that the costumes the children had made might be offensive, the principal told the kids to leave their construction-paper headdresses on the classroom shelves.

Those who had opted to be pilgrims fared no better. Their paper black hats and bonnets also were banned, and for the first time in more than two decades, the 1st graders at Madison School commemorated the events of October 1621 in their school clothes.

The children had been preparing their Pilgrim and Indian costumes for a month. But, after receiving the lone parental complaint, the school's principal, Pete Davis, took decisive action. He consulted the American Indian Center and the Native American Educational Services College, and they explained that permitting the children to dress up in "generic Indian outfits" promoted "Hollywood-type stereotypes of American Indians"—which must be news to the kids, because you'd have to be well into late middle-age to remember any "Hollywood-type stereotypes" like poor old Tonto. But Leonard Malatare of the American Indian Center said schools still needed to be alert to the problem. "You let them dress up in feathers and do the little Indian thing, they'll grow up with that image in their head," Mr.

Malatare said. "I've had people come up and ask me if I was born in a teepee. We need to start getting away from these stereotypes." His colleague, David Spencer, director of development at the center, agrees. "They are representing Native Americans as one group of people, not a diverse community," he says.

So what did the school do instead? Well, in place of the usual re-enactment of the first Thanksgiving, they booked Mr. Malatare to tell the children about "his culture."

Every day small acts of historical vandalism are perpetrated at grade schools across the country by the likes of Principal Davis: something that is true is replaced by something that is "sensitive."

He taught them some words in the Oglala Lakota language and led the children in a traditional blessing. A traditional Lakota blessing, I hasten to add. Had he led the children in a traditional Protestant blessing for anything other than the consecration of a gay bishop, the School Board would have been up to its neck in ACLU suits. But a Lakota blessing, you can't go wrong, can you?

Sadly, Keith Liscio, a parent of a child at the school, was somewhat churlish about this cultural enlightenment. "I don't think it had anything to do with Thanksgiving," he grumbled. "It kind of just hijacked the whole purpose of today's program." His daughter and her friend were in tears after being told they couldn't wear their Pilgrim outfits, and he'd found it hard to explain why. "This is a tradition that was changed in the blink of an eyelid because one person complained." But the school was adamant that the "offensive" practice of re-enacting the original Thanksgiving was gone for good, and that the new culturally sensitive program was more appropriate.

Just one question: What have Mr. Malatare and his Oglala Lakota lesson got to do with Thanksgiving?

I hasten to add I have nothing against the Oglala—the first American to win the 10,000 metres at the Olympics was an Oglala Lakota (Billy Mills, Tokyo, 1964); the Pine Ridge Oglala reservation in South Dakota was the first Indian reservation to boast a native-owned and -operated radio station. If Mr. Malatare had time left over, after explaining his feelings at being stereotyped, to impart either of these facts, I'm sure the children appreciated them.

But the Lakota are Plains Indians. They were nowhere near Massachusetts in 1621. They had no contact with the white man until the mid-eighteenth century. The Indians who celebrated the first Thanksgiving were Wampanoags, part of the Eastern Algonquin conference. Did they “dress up in feathers and do the little Indian thing”? Well, their leader, more commonly known as Massasoit, bore the name Usamequin, which means “Yellow Feather.” I am indebted for this information to Chief Wilfred “Eagle Heart” Greene, a Wampanoag from the same corner of Rhode Island. His colleague, Three Feathers, is trying to organize a memorial to Massasoit. The Massasoit slide show at their website shows people “dressed up in feathers and doing the little Indian thing.”

Was Mr. Malatare born in a teepee? Evidently not, and it must be a nuisance to have to fend off so many enquiries to that effect. But in the Algonquian villages of New England, families lived in small circular wigwams or longhouses shaped like bread loaves and covered with slabs of bark or woven mats. They did not speak Oglala Lakota. Some of them, such as Massasoit's interpreters Tisquantum and Samoset, spoke English. Samoset had picked up the language from white fishermen and Tisquantum, a.k.a. Squanto, had learned English while in, er, England.

So it would seem that the six year olds' unacceptable, offensive, culturally insensitive portrayal of Thanksgiving—feathers,

teepees, basic grasp of first-grade English—is broadly historically accurate, while Mr. Malatare's culturally respectful, authentic, ethnic Thanksgiving—no feathers, no teepees, Sioux greetings in the Oglala language—is ahistorical bunk. Which version would you bet will catch on with Illinois school districts?

Insofar as Mr. Malatare has a grievance, it would seem to be not with the six year olds at Madison Elementary but with the Wampanoags and other Algonquin Indians of the Eastern Seaboard. Because they were the first Native Americans encountered by the white man, they established the “Hollywood-type stereotype”—feathers, teepees, the whole “little Indian thing.” No doubt many members of the Non-Native American community might complain that all the black hats and bonnets of the Pilgrims—the whole uptight square thing—unfairly stereotypes white people. They might prefer, oh, Hef in his bathrobe relaxing with Joey Bishop and a couple of Bunnies in the grotto at the Playboy Mansion. That would be no more or less inauthentic a Thanksgiving than Mr. Malatare's.

But it's not really about Thanksgiving, is it? On receiving the lone complaint about his school's decades-old holiday celebration, Principal Davis could have done what I did—mooched around in a reference book for ten minutes. Instead, the moment he heard the Sensitivity Police were on his case, he ran to the relevant ethnic-grievance bodies and sub-contracted his pupils' Thanksgiving commemorations to them, even though, as should surely have been clear, Mr. Malatare's approach to the issue is: “But enough about Thanksgiving. Let's talk about me.” So now the first graders learn nothing about American history, nothing about that remarkable celebration when the Pilgrims gave thanks for their unlikely survival in this difficult climate with the Indian people who had helped them raise enough food to do so. Instead, they learn about Mr. Malatare's feelings.

Every day small acts of historical van-

dalism are perpetrated at grade schools across the country by the likes of Principal Davis: something that is true is replaced by something that is “sensitive”—even if, as in this case, “sensitivity” involves being entirely insensitive to historical reality. In diving straight for the refuge of the American Indian Center, Mr. Davis was merely the latest “educator” to embark on the flight from facts to feelings.

After my random sampling of Iraqi classrooms, I began to read the foot-of-page-twelve news stories of American school-house loopiness with renewed interest.

In the United States . . . the school system seems dedicated to diminishing if not entirely denigrating American achievement.

Considered in the objective sense, is it any crazier to teach that Saddam is descended from Saladin than that the U.S. Constitution was modeled on the forms of government developed by the Iroquois? If anything, the deceptions of the American school system are weirder than those of Saddam’s board of education: In Iraq and Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority, the education system exists to indoctrinate its charges in the regime’s glories—given the regimes in question, this takes some doing, but at least it has a rough logic of victor’s justice about it. In the United States, by contrast, the school system seems dedicated to diminishing if not entirely denigrating American achievement. French education is still, by and large, a celebration of French achievement, which gets harder to pull off with each passing decade. But even Britain and other Anglophone school systems prone to the same cult of self-loathing as America are not quite in the same advanced stage of the disease. No other state education system goes to such comprehensive lengths to portray the founders of the nation only by their flaws—as “racists, murderers of Indians,

representatives of class interests,” as Allan Bloom wrote in *The Closing of the American Mind*, an emphasis on the feet of clay to the exclusion of all else, “weakening our convictions of the truth or superiority of American principles and our heroes.”

That’s why so many school Christmas—sorry, holiday—concerts rapidly advanced from banning “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem” to equally stringent prohibitions on “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Frosty the Snowman.” It’s not about the separation of church and state, so much as the separation of people from other people and, indeed, of all of them from reality. Al Gore somewhat endearingly gave the game away a few years back when he was in Milwaukee giving a speech on diversity: the town’s multi-ethnic population, he said, was living proof that, in the words of the Great Seal of the United States, America “can be e pluribus unum—out of one, many.” Close enough and, as it happens, a lot more accurate these days than however the old outmoded translation went, which is no doubt why the media gave Al a pass on all those Vice-President-who-can’t-speak-Latin cracks they’d buried his predecessor under.

The Gore approach denies the very possibility of a common culture other than the traditional Santa suit filed by the ACLU over the entirely theoretical offense the holly wreath on the town offices gives to Buddhists and Wiccans. As you’ll gather from that, the present arrangements are not without their compensations for those of us with a (so to speak) black sense of humor. To be honest, the old-style Christmas concerts were a bit of a bore, with the moppets lurching through the same old seasonal favorites. These days, there’s always a thrill of anticipation as one approaches the school gym and prepares for the onslaught of an evening’s unseasonal favorites—ancient Swahili Kwanzaa anthems dating all the way back to the early 1970s, New Age drones about the Great Spirit, a token dirge from the Hanukkah songbook whose slim pickings testify

mainly to the fact that most of America's big-time musical Jews (Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, Sammy Cahn) were too busy writing Christmas songs. My friend emerged from her daughter's kindergarten concert in a rage: not just no Christmas carols, but no "Jingle Bells." The only song she recognized was Lionel Bart's spectacular melisma pile-up from *Oliver!*, "Whe-e-e-ere Is Love?," which is not designed to be sung en masse. "The kids sounded like they were dying," she fumed, before going off to beard the school board, who explained that "Jingle Bells" had been given the heave-ho on the grounds that it might be insensitive to those of a non-jingly persuasion. I'd say maybe 1 percent of us take offense, another 20 percent feel good at having demonstrated the lengths they're prepared to go to to avoid giving offense, another 20 percent feel as steamed as my friend, and the rest of us metaphorically roll our eyes, grin and bear it, and tell ourselves it's basically harmless.

But is it? My little grade-school chum in Ramadi understood, even at his young age, the relation between state power and personal well-being: several children in his neighborhood had "disappeared" after their parents fell out with the party. He appreciated that, although he could avoid obvious trouble by not succumbing to the temptation to draw twirly bits on the ends of Saddam's moustache, in the end the state's cruelty was, from his perspective, entirely whimsical. But, on the other hand, how would one categorize the judgments of the American school system? As I write, a high school sophomore in Louisiana has fallen afoul of the district's "zero tolerance" drugs policy because she was found to have Advil in her possession. Parkway High expelled Amanda Stiles for a year, her parents went to the school board, but the school board upheld the decision. So the parents, who say they can't afford private school, are now going to have to move to another town. You can turn up stories like this almost every day of the year. Between Iraq and Louisiana, the arbitrariness of the state's viciousness differs in degree. But, even with

the important caveat that young Miss Stiles will not be tossed into an underground children's prison, the Louisiana school system seems quite as detached from reality as Baghdad's.

Iraq was a totalitarian killing field, so why wouldn't its education system be insane? Or to put it another way: what's our excuse? Consider the 2002 "Diversity Week" program at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For the discussion on "Homosexuality and Religion," school officials hand-picked a panel composed exclusively of pro-gay clergy. When a Catholic student, Betsy Hansen, asked to be allowed to present the Church's traditional teaching on the subject, she was told by the school that her views were "negative" and would "water down" the "positive" message they wanted to convey—that even religious dudes think gay sex is way cool. As we know, "diversity" means homogeneity—even if, as in this case, the homogeneity is utterly at odds with reality.

The issue is not whether this panel is a useful deployment of term time (I spent my formative years at an English boys' school, and those of my friends partial to homosexuality didn't need "positive" messages from the school administration to encourage them to take to it with gusto), or whether homosexual behavior is sinful. What's preposterous are the lengths the school is prepared to go to to deny that there's any difference of opinion on the subject: the Catholic Church and the Baptists and Islam and all kinds of other folks are disapproving of gay sex; even down the Episcopal end of things, one gay bishop in New England has wound up severing American Anglicanism from its brothers around the world. So Pioneer High School's "positive" message is, in fact, false. It's propaganda and, whether or not its propaganda is more "positive" than that of the Baathists, it's not something that a respectable education system should be engaged in.

I'm not plucking apples and oranges here. The reason for examining American education in the light of Iraqi education is a

simple one: ever since the coalition victory last spring, the Americans have been in charge of the Iraqi school system. On the face of it, this should be no different from any other sphere of administration under the liberators: British and American soldiers train the new Iraqi army, British and American police train the new Iraqi constabulary, British and American civil servants train the new Iraqi public service. But you'll be relieved to hear the Superintendent of Parkway High and the Principal of Madison Elementary are not on their way to Baghdad. Indeed, no one from the entire American educational establishment seems to have been allowed anywhere near Iraq's schools. John Agresto, the senior coalition adviser for higher education, was previously the president of St. John's College in Santa Fe, a school that specializes in classical education based on a "great books" curriculum, which sounds like the sort of thing that would get him blocked by the Democrats if the President nominated him for U.S. Secretary of Education. The largest Iraqi education contract has gone to Creative Associates International, Inc., headed by Charito Krivant, whose experience of public education in America is limited to a spell as an emergency schools trustee in Washington beginning in 1996, when the D.C. financial control board stripped the elected school board of its powers.

This is very different from the way the British Empire dealt with the matter in the days when thousands of schoolmarm from the Welsh valleys and the industrial Midlands were dispatched to remote colonial outposts. John Southard of Emory University has characterized imperial education thus: "Colonizing governments realize that they gain strength not necessarily through physical control, but through mental control. This mental control is implemented through a central intellectual location, the school system." A more benign interpretation of the strategy was made by a great English historian, and at that time a member of the council of the East India Company, in a famous "Minute on Education":

"We have a fund to be employed as Government shall direct for the intellectual improvement of the people of this country. The simple question is, what is the most useful way of employing it?" wrote Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835.

It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But, when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England. In every rank of physical or moral philosophy the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.

In other words, for Macaulay, to give the people of India a British education was to give them a passport to modernity or, as he put it, "ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth, which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations." Granted, this was not merely a generous gesture from kindly rulers. The benefit of a vastly expanded and Britannicized school system to the metropolitan power was that, through education, they would create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

This system did not work everywhere: in Africa especially, the British were too respectful of local chiefs and traditional structures—a prototype deference to "multiculturalism" with consequences that that benighted continent lives with to this day. But in much of Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean it worked very well. "American blacks sometimes regard Americans of

West Indian origin as uppity and arrogant,” writes Colin Powell in his autobiography.

The feeling, I imagine, grows out of an impressive record of accomplishment by West Indians. What explains that success? For one thing, the British ended slavery in the Caribbean in 1833, well over a generation before America did. They told my ancestors that they were now British citizens with all the rights of any subject of the Crown. That was an exaggeration: still, the British did establish good schools and made attendance mandatory. Consequently, West Indians had an opportunity to develop attitudes of independence, self-responsibility, and self-worth.

Which may be one reason that the most prominent black man in American life today is the son of British subjects, raised outside the festering Balkanized grievance culture of the Jesse Jacksified African-American community. But Powell’s point is well-taken more generally: A good colonial education system offers short-term advantages to the imperial power but over the long term sows the seeds of its own destruction. Its alumni will eventually be not just “English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” but English in the assumption that they are entitled to liberty and responsible government. That’s what happened in Colin Powell’s Jamaica, as it did in India, Singapore, and Papua New Guinea.

Whether or not you agree with Macaulay’s argument or with Professor Southard’s characterization of it makes no difference. If education is a critical component of the white man’s burden, who’s there to take it up? Even if you wanted to teach Iraqis about Washington and Jefferson, New England Town Meetings and the First Amendment, to whom would you entrust the civilizing mission? In the schools of the British Empire, Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Henry V and Sir Isaac Newton were as vivid presences as they were in any classroom in Birmingham or Glasgow. By contrast, George Washington is barely a vivid presence in

Washington (too insensitive; he was a slaveholder). Any of those spinster schoolmarms shipped to Tuvalu or Belize could be relied on to teach the exploits of Sir Francis Drake or the Duke of Wellington. If you were to dispatch the likes of Principal Davis to Mosul, Iraqi children would be unlikely to receive any more attractive a view of America than they did under Saddam.

Lest you think that an exaggeration, turn to a 1989 New York State Regents’ Report: “African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European-American world for centuries.” Thus the opening sentence of a report on curriculum reform, “A Curriculum of Inclusion.”

“The content of the curriculum is distorted, outdated, and completely politicized for the last three decades,” said Dr. Ala Alwan. He was talking about Iraq’s schools. But re-read that sentence from New York’s Regents: it’s also distorted and completely politicized, not to mention tediously passé. That’s one reason why, despite the fondest hopes of romantics like Niall Ferguson, America can never be an imperial power: the institutions necessary for such a mission not only lack the cultural confidence, they’re slumped in what John O’Sullivan calls “counter-tribalism” to such a degree that they reflexively take the other side, no matter who’s on it: Oglala Lakota Indians at Thanksgiving; 1960s Afro-Marxists at Christmas; misogynist homophobic fundamentalist mullahs in the war on terror. By the afternoon of September 11, 2001, the social studies teacher had already informed my neighbor’s daughter that the allies killed more civilians in the bombing of Dresden. A year later, for the first anniversary on September 11 2002, the National Education Association had prepared a formal series of classroom lessons to discuss the, ah, “tragic events”:

Explore the problems inherent in assigning

blame to populations or nations of people by looking at contemporary examples of ethnic conflict, discrimination, and stereotyping at home and abroad.

Okay. Any suggestions?

Internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor and the backlash against Arab Americans during the Gulf War are obvious examples.

I'll say. When our nation comes under attack, some of us turn to our troops, the rest of us retreat to our tropes. It's hard to conceive of an al-Qaeda atrocity so horrifying the NEA wouldn't automatically respond by suggesting it provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on the internment of Japanese-Americans and the legacy of slavery. Even America's so-called "cultural hegemony" seems to rest as much on international anti-America blockbusters by Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky or films, TV shows, and pop songs that seem reluctant to promote American virtues other than car chases and meaningless sex. In 2002, I had the bizarre experience of watching the Oscars while in Paris, where Tom Hanks's opening remarks that "when we're at the movies, we're not alone" lost quite a bit in translation. Tom meant that movies bring together the peoples of the world. If that's true, it's mainly so in the sense that decades of exposure to the healing balm of Hanks and Co. have united the world in the cause of anti-Americanism. As I said at the time, right now somewhere in Frankfurt, Rotterdam, or Wolverhampton an Islamist terrorist is sitting in a Yankees cap, Disney T-shirt, and Nike sneakers plotting how to blow up the White House. "Cultural imperialism" of this kind is less useful to the mother country than the old-school version.

The actor Ron Silver, perhaps the least crazy guy in Hollywood, recently observed that America was divided into September 10th people and September 11th people. Almost all the elites—the arts, the media, the

academy, the Episcopal bishops both gay and non-gay—are virtually to a man September 10th people. This is a very strange circumstance in which to embark upon a long war. But, in fairness to some of those groups, when they're not in September 10th mode, they can at least do their jobs. I wouldn't want to live in a country run by, say, Paul Newman and Vanessa Redgrave, but I don't dispute their talent as actors.

The failures of American schoolteachers are uniquely catastrophic, because . . . their reflexive cultural cringe has become a substitute for doing their job.

Barbra Streisand's and Tim Robbins's politics are, in that sense, extra-curricular. But in the schoolhouse they are, literally, curricular. The cult of sensitivity seeps into every corner: when facts conflict with the "positive" message, junk the facts; when academic rigor risks damaging self-esteem, stick with the self-esteem. The failures of American schoolteachers are uniquely catastrophic, because, unlike Streisand and Robbins, their reflexive cultural cringe has become a substitute for doing their job.

We can plough through the statistics page by page, but in a nutshell it's this: American students are statistically the dumbest in the industrial world. We can flesh this out more politely: in the surveys of twelfth graders in math and science, America scores below pretty well any functioning state—Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, Germany, the whole of western Europe, much of eastern Europe, Japan, China, and the Asian tigers; the U.S. comes below Lithuania, which was a Soviet backwater a decade ago, and is only just managing to hold its own with Cyprus. (For those *New Criterion* readers who are American high school graduates, Cyprus is a small island in the Mediterranean; population: 800,000;

principal crops: grain, grapes, carobs, citrus fruits, olives.)

That ranking is the culmination of thirteen years in the American system. The upshot of the research is this: the longer American children are exposed to American teachers, the more stupid they get. Kindergarteners can just about compete with their opposite numbers in western Europe. But by middle school, forget it. In a survey of seventeen members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Americans made less progress in mathematics between the fourth and eighth grades than any other nation. Bill Clinton's commitment to ensure that every American child went to college was the logical extension of this system: as I understand his proposal, students would leave college at, oh, twenty-eight, thirty-six, whatever, more or less competitive with Sudanese fourth graders. (For those *New Criterion* readers who are American college graduates, Sudan is a strife-riven East African hellhole; population: 30 million; principal export: Islamist terrorists.)

It would make more sense to quit while you're ahead, or at any rate not yet behind, and institute a mandatory school leaving age of six-and-a-half. Sending every American to college will give the educational establishment yet another excuse to postpone teaching their students anything for a couple more years, so that eventually pupils will be doing as a Bachelor's Degree what they should have learned in Seventh Grade. The deterioration that begins on Day One of kindergarten should be a source of shame to the NEA. Instead, they pride themselves that, while they have the lowest test scores of any developed country in any measurable discipline, they have the most advanced feelings on issues like the environment. In Allan Bloom's words, "American high school graduates are among the most sensitive illiterates in the world." Perhaps this is true. Or perhaps they're just faking it: shortly before they opened fire at Columbine High School, those two bozos from Littleton, Colorado had managed to ace

their anger-management courses. Even the sensitivity regime isn't *that* demanding.

It would be more accurate to say that American high school graduates are the most expensive illiterates in the world. In real terms, education spending has quadrupled in the last four decades to the point where America now lavishes more on its school students than any other country except Switzerland—in 1999, the Swiss spent \$9,756 per pupil, the U.S. \$8,157, Japan \$6,039, Canada \$5,981, the United Kingdom \$5,608, Spain \$4,864, etc. But the Swiss at least have something to show for that ten thousand bucks. By fourth grade, much of the damage done by U.S. teachers becomes irretrievable: that's the age at which a competent student stops learning to read and starts reading to learn. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, in 1998 only 29 percent of American fourth graders achieved such proficiency. The cost to the taxpayer of educating each student to that point was \$30,945. Yet, given the 71 percent failure rate, the real cost to taxpayers of producing a proficient fourth grade reader is \$30,945 divided by 29 percent or \$107,000. In the District of Columbia, it takes almost half a million dollars to produce one proficient fourth grade reader: when you look at it like that, it would be cheaper and more efficient to pluck children at random and send them to boarding school in Switzerland.

It's possible to think the crisis in education is to do with lack of money only if one is as deficient in basic reading and arithmetic as the average D.C. grade schooler. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the lazy demands for more money and a better pupil/teacher ratio can be found in Bridgehampton, Long Island, whose 153-pupil K-12 public school draws from the deep pockets of an indulgent and partly absentee tax base: It spends \$45,090 per student; it has one teacher for every 3.7 pupils; its largest class has twelve students. Yet in math and English its elementary and middle school pupils score below the state averages, which

are themselves utterly mediocre. These are sums of money that in other jurisdictions would pay for the most rigorous elite private education. But in the U.S. all you get for \$45,000 is vague fluffy feelings about Lakota Indians.

The easy assumption is that this underperformance by comparison with all other industrial countries arises from the fact that America's is a young, rough-and-tumble democracy compared to the older educational traditions of Europe and Japan. But the present abysmal standards are historically unprecedented. Far from being at the bottom of the international leagues, early America had higher standards of literacy than the Continent. In 1818, Noah Webster's spelling book sold five million copies in a population of 20 million. By 1840 over 90 percent of the American population was literate. This was a time before widespread compulsory government schooling, when low-paid rural teachers in one-room multi-grade schoolhouses boarded with neighborhood farmers, and boys especially spent little more than three months a year in class. A century and a half later, the Motorola Corporation was spending \$50 million a year teaching seventh grade math and English to its adult factory workers.

And who's to say the corporations don't do a better job of it than the schools? After all, they could hardly do a worse job—at least to judge by the results of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts's very first basic reading-and-writing test—not for pupils, but for teachers. The legislature passed a bill mandating “standardized examination” for educators in 1985, but, with the insouciance for which the educational establishment is renowned, somehow it took thirteen years for the first test to be administered. Teachers were asked to define what a noun is and spell words like “imminent.” When the results came in, 59 percent had failed. Confronted by this unnerving figure, the Massachusetts Board of Education reached an immediate decision: they lowered the bar. Instead of accepting C as a passing grade, the board voted to ac-

cept D. That meant that—hey presto!—suddenly only 44 percent had failed. Board members said they'd voted to lower the threshold partly to prevent immanunt—imminent?—lawsuits from the failed teachers for loss of self-esteem, etc.: as Shaw said, he who can, does; he who cannot, sues.

The Clinton Administration's response was to demand federal funding for “100,000 new teachers.” To replace those who failed the Massachusetts test? Perish the thought: it was in addition to those already employed. Because we need to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. Don't ask me why.

It's possible to think the crisis in education is to do with lack of money only if one is as deficient in basic reading and arithmetic as the average D.C. grade schooler.

One 2003 survey suggests that proximity to Canada is a more accurate predictor of performance than money or class size: low-spending, big-class northern states do better than high-spending small-class southern ones. Yet no one at the NEA is suggesting we need to move the rest of the country up to the 49th parallel. And say what you like about big classes: at least you've improved your odds of finding a pupil who'll be able to tell the teacher how to spell “imminent.”

In the 1990s, America got so used to politicians claiming that this or that policy was about “the future of all our children”—war in Kosovo, the highway appropriations bill, the mohair subsidy—that they seemed happy to allow education to be the exception that proves the rule: education is about the future of all our teachers and bureaucrats and administrators; our children will just have to rub along as best they can. It hardly needs stating that the future of all our children is our only future, too. The crisis for most western countries this century is the absence of babies: Japan and

Western Europe have collapsed birth rates that will eventually put them out of business entirely and within the next generation impact disastrously on their economic well-being and social order. But education is to America as demographics are to Europe: in Italy, the schoolhouses built in the 1970s in the confident expectation of traditional Catholic birth rates stand empty; in America, we have the raw material but, because of political cravenness, we raise them in an environment of sappy propaganda so inadequate to preparing them for what lies ahead it verges on child abuse.

People will be in short supply in the western world in 2050, and educated people will be at a premium. It would be a tragedy for the U.S. to throw away its demographic advantage for a stale self-victimization fetish. But at some point the deteriorating education system will threaten America's future. It goes wrong from Day One and that's where it has to be fixed—at the kindergarten end, rather than college. If American children receive an effective, challenging grade-school education, there's a limit to the damage high school and even Ivy League professors can do. So how to go about it? The unions and bureaucrats are too entrenched at state and municipal level to make it likely it can ever be fixed on a school-by-school basis. But, looked at in political terms, I'm struck by one of the real changes since 9/11. If Ron Silver is correct in his division of America into September 11th and September 10th people, then it seems clear that, with one exception, all this year's Democratic candidates have fallen into the latter camp. That's one reason why Mr. Silver, a Democrat, is now a Bush supporter: if you're a September 11th person, if you think the "war on terror" is a war and not just a matter of closer cooperation between the Department of Justice and Interpol or of more discussions with the French, then it's awfully hard to be a Democrat. Mr. Silver is representative of a small but significant sliver of the citizenry for whom the pieties of multilateralism no longer fly.

Would it not be possible to extend this

post-9/11 clarity to the domestic scene and the pieties of multiculturalism? Transformational presidents seize the opportunities presented by extreme events, as FDR did in the Depression. After September 11, George W. Bush had his own opportunity to reverse the most malign tide in the civilized world—the multiculti gloom in which all cultures are accorded equal "respect" and "tolerance," even the intolerant ones that are trying to kill us. The President could have stated the obvious—that western self-loathing is a psychosis we can no longer afford; that it's fraudulent and damaging, especially when it's presented to American children as a religious faith whose orthodoxies all have to sign on to, and which in the name of "inclusivity" excludes everything, from Paul Revere to "Frosty the Snowman."

When Cromwell instructed his portraitist to paint him "warts and all," he meant both halves of the equation: unless you see "all," you cannot honestly evaluate the "warts"; to understand the blemishes on the record, you first have to understand the record. To teach the warts alone is a morbid fetish. Mr. Bush should take the lead in a campaign against the debilitating equivalence of multiculturalism, but parents must play their part, too: every little first-grade Thanksgiving that gets hijacked by the grievance culture is an act of violence against truth and history. In the Nineties, urban police departments came to realize that if you failed to deal with small, trivial crimes they led to more and bigger ones. We need a cultural equivalent of that "broken window" policy. If you let a craven principal take the Pilgrims and Algonquians out of Thanksgiving, you kick away one of the small steps on which a child climbs to informed adulthood.

The enemy understands this. What is the principal weapon of militant Islamism? The schoolhouse. Toxic Wahhabi madrasahs are found not just where you'd expect them to be—Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan—but around the world—Pakistan, Indonesia, Chechnya, the Balkans, Berlin, Amsterdam, Virginia, Oregon. The Islamists have set up

an education system that at the very least radicalizes hitherto moderate Muslim populations and at the worst serves as an active recruiting mill for terrorists. For young Muslims in the West, the attraction is obvious: radical Islamism provides all the cultural confidence the state of which they're nominally citizens goes out of the way to avoid. From Russian Communism to Japanese militarism, many of the most murderous ideologies in a murderous century arose in societies which were aware of their material inferiority (*vis à vis* other countries) but convinced of their cultural superiority. By inverting the formula, the perverse philosophy of Western education—that our society is materially superior but culturally inferior—seems almost to invite the obvious response: the radical madrasahs merely answered the call. If all you teach is that everyone else is the victim of the “intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European-American world for centuries,” people will eventually take you at your word. If you trumpet how much you despise yourself, it would be churlish for everyone else not to despise you also.

Thomas Macaulay, pondering the Indian education system, was no admirer of the madrasahs, which he would have abolished if he could. “We are to teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine because we find them in company with a false religion,” he remarked, somewhat insensitively. But today, increasingly, we teach false history, false astronomy, false medicine because of the false religion of sensitivity. Macaulay's critique of Muslim and Hindu education is as pertinent to our schools today: too much is excluded or distorted or ignored because it conflicts with the articles of faith. Was he a racist? No. Looking back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he wrote, “At that time almost everything worth reading was contained in the writings of the Greeks and Romans. Had our ancestors neglected the

language of Thucydides and Plato, of Cicero and Tacitus, would England ever have been what she is now?” Cultures don't become dominant only through plunder and oppression, whatever the New York State Regents say. To deprive students of a full appreciation of the cultural inheritance of the last half-millennium is to deprive them of an understanding of literature, medicine, science, art, and their own historical inheritance. Macaulay advocated the teaching of Greek and Latin and English as part of the seamless robe of history.

Charles Grant, the first advocate of modernizing education in India, put it simply: “The true cure of darkness is the introduction of light.” If a progressive education is truly enlightened, it's curious that it depends so much on keeping people in the dark. When President Bush visited London in November, he gave an interesting speech, in the course of which he paid tribute to the Royal Navy for its role in ending the slave trade. Well said. It's true. The agency that did more to abolish slaving than anybody else was the military force of the dominant white Anglo-Saxon power of the day. But, for all the self-flagellation about slavery in American schools, how many pupils are ever exposed to that fact? Like Saladin's ethnicity in the classrooms of Tikrit, it's a fact that doesn't fit the propaganda. This new faith of sensitivity must be a very delicate bloom if it cannot be exposed to the light of one contrary shaft: How many of our teachers understand this and are ashamed at what they do, as some of those teachers I met in Iraq were? Or do they truly believe, like the Baathist apparatchiks, that they're engaged on a great project that will enable their young charges to be model citizens of a remade society? I confess that, in America as in Iraq, I can't tell which is which, and have come to the conclusion it doesn't matter either way. Grant is right: our schools are dark places of irrationality and superstition; let there be light.

Leibniz & Job: The metaphysics of evil & the experience of evil

by Leszek Kolakowski

To review human reflection about evil is to review the entire history of theology, philosophy, religion, and literature, from the Rig Veda to Plato to Dostoyevski to Wittgenstein. And to consider the effective operations of evil in human life is to consider the whole history of mankind, from paleolithic tribes to us now.

There are two ways—each of them with a number of variants—that philosophers, theologians, scholars, scientists, and ordinary people have tried, throughout the centuries, to cope with the so-called problem of evil. As with all important human issues, we can try either to solve the “problem” or to get rid of it altogether by declaring it invalid: by denying that the problem exists. Among those who tried to tackle the problem, we find adherents of two fundamentally opposite (or so it seems) metaphysics: Manichaeans and Christians. Among those who denied the validity of the problem—though not all of them for the same reason—there are some mystics, some pantheists, all Marxists and Communists, most other utopians, and most advocates of a naturalistic world-view, like Nietzscheans, Nazis, and philosophical Darwinists.

It is trivially true that the concept of evil as pure negativity is a simple deduction from the belief in a creator who is both unique and infinitely good, so that whatever is, is good necessarily, and existence as such is good. This, to repeat, is a logical deduction, not a matter of experience. But

it is mostly through such arguments that Christian theodicy has made its enormous, indeed heroic, efforts to respond to the most common experience of ordinary people—the experience of evil. When St. Augustine says that the very presence of evil must be good because if it were not, God would not have allowed evil to appear, he is stating something that is obvious in Christian terms. This, again, is a logical deduction from the concept of God; it implies that God could, if he wanted, prevent evil from appearing, but for reasons best known to Himself preferred to let it stay.

Leibniz is more specific in explaining what those reasons may have been. He, too, does so by deduction. Having proved the necessary existence of God and, separately, His supreme goodness, Leibniz inferred from these that God must have created the best world that is logically conceivable, and that this is the world we inhabit; any other world would be worse.

Voltaire’s famous derision of this idea is too easy. Leibniz was well aware of the horrors of life. Nevertheless, belief in the supreme goodness of creation is irresistible given such an idea of the divine being. And it implies that God, in His all-embracing wisdom, must have solved, as it were, an equation in an infinitely complex higher calculus, in order to calculate which world would produce the maximum goodness. Christian tradition has always stressed, after Plato, the distinction between moral evil

and suffering: moral evil—*malum culpae*—is the inevitable result of human (and angelic) free will, and Leibniz's creator reckoned that a universe populated by rational creatures endowed with free will, and thus capable of doing evil, would generate more good than a world whose dwellers would, in effect, be automata, programed never to do evil (and presumably, though Leibniz does not say so explicitly, never to do good either, if by a good action we mean, as we commonly do, an action done out of choice, not from compulsion).

As for non-man-made suffering—*malum poenae* in the Christian idiom—there are two possible answers. One says that it is the work of malevolent spirits whose work is permitted by God in order to punish us, correct us, warn us, etc. The other, in the Leibnizian spirit, says that such suffering results from the workings of the laws of nature and that God is not omnipotent in the sense that He can combine everything with anything and impose on the physical universe an order where things would not move according to strict regularities—would stop interfering and colliding with each other. Those Christian thinkers who believed (like some fourteenth-century nominalists and, among contemporary thinkers, Shastov) that God is omnipotent in the absolute sense, i.e., that He can change the past and establish moral commandments and the laws of mathematics by *fiat*, left themselves more vulnerable to the traditional Epicurean argument: if so, then—since there is evil in the world—God must be either evil or powerless.

This criticism does not affect Leibnizian theodicy, where God cannot alter the rules of logic or mathematics, but this is not a limitation of His omnipotence, for those rules, valid in themselves, are not imposed on God like some alien law: they are identical with him. Therefore we should not complain and ask God why he failed to make our universe a paradise without suffering. Besides, God never promised that he would suspend the laws of nature for our benefit and use miracles to prevent people

from harming one another; He did not promise a world without wars, torture, Auschwitz, or Gulags.

All this is trivial and well known. Not surprisingly, however, many people have found that this theological structure fails to give them a satisfactory explanation of the evil they face, experience, and do. It is not convincing to the ordinary mind to be told that evil is pure privation, a purely negative phenomenon; that the devil is a good thing insofar as he exists; and that human suffering and pain are elements of the best arrangement God could have devised for the world. The ordinary mind is much more inclined to echo what Voltaire famously (and ironically) said after the Lisbon earthquake: that the world would be worse without it. By the same token, it would seem that the world would be worse if there had been no Auschwitz and no Gulags, or, for that matter, if I had not broken my finger.

But here, again, Leibniz, or any other Christian theologian, would say that this is the wrong way of looking at the question. They do not claim, they would say, to be able to apply a divine algorithm and demonstrate that particular instances of suffering, however horrifying, turn out, on closer inspection, to be good—in the infinite global balance-sheet, because each prevents a greater evil from occurring or makes a greater good possible. The balance-sheet is known only to God; we cannot try to reproduce it, and it would be hopeless to try. Besides, we have no idea how to measure and quantitatively compare various evils and goods in their infinite variety. The proper attitude is to trust God's plan in advance, without calculation or complaint; to accept it, and with it to accept all human misery and the indifferent destructiveness of nature. The idea (present in St. Augustine and in Hegel) that evil is needed for aesthetic reasons—because it adorns the world by the contrasts and variety it creates—sounds even more preposterous.

It is understandable that in the face of so many tormenting riddles the human mind came up with another solution, which we usually, rightly or not, call Manichaean. It

goes back to old Iranian mythology, and it seems convincing and in accordance with our everyday experience. It says that there are two powers, or twin gods, good and evil, which fight each other, and that the evil we know from experience—i.e., suffering—is simply the work of the evil god.

In contrast to its Zoroastrian source, Manichaean theology, like its various gnostic relatives and unlike Christian doctrine, sees matter as the creation of the evil power. The Manichaean world-view has been a constant temptation for Christians, and for the European mind in general. We find the thought that Satanic powers, whatever their origin, are unflaggingly trying to upset God's benevolent blueprint, and that quite often they succeed in doing so, more natural and in accordance with common sense than many other explanations of evil. Manichaeism is absorbed by our minds, so to speak, with minimal resistance.

Even Judaism, which has the reputation of being the one-God religion *par excellence*, the model of monotheistic thinking, is not free of this temptation. Gershom Sholem, one of the most distinguished scholars of the history of Kabbala and Jewish mysticism, tells us that the book of Zohar often presents evil as something real, or positive, not just as privation. God's powers make a good harmonious whole, His judgments are good, His right hand distributes love and mercy, and His left hand is the organ of His wrath—but it is when the latter operates independently of the former that radical evil appears: the kingdom of Satan. We do not know whether Jacob Boehme was familiar with kabbalistic writings, but his theosophy contains a similar idea: evil is the negative principle of divine wrath; it is independent of human will and is somehow embedded in the structure of the world.

Some ancient Platonists (e.g., Plutarch of Chaeroneia or Numenius) also succumbed to this belief in two independent powers, good and evil. For Plotinus, however, evil is simply the absolutely inevitable bottom rung on the ladder of being; the absolute goodness of the One could not escape the

natural descent of reality into matter. Nevertheless, we must still, of course, abhor the gnostic doctrines that the Creator of the world is himself evil.

Even in the dogmas of the Roman Church we find remnants of this "dualistic" theology. Matter itself cannot be evil, of course; conversely, the Church also condemned, in 1347, the theory of Nicholas Autrecourt, who wrote that the world is absolutely perfect, both as a whole and in each of its parts (*universum est perfectissimum secundum se et secundum omnes partes suas*)—presumably because such a daring statement seemed to suggest that there simply *is* no evil in the world: no sinful will of corrupted creatures, human or diabolic. But the Catholic belief in the eternity of hell and the irreversible fate of the fallen angels implies that some, indeed very large parts, of evil are indestructible, irredeemable, incurable; that the world will for ever be split into two realms, morally opposed to each other. Not surprisingly, some of the Greek Fathers, and some later theologians, were unable to stomach these dogmas or to reconcile them with the image of an absolutely good, loving, and merciful Creator.

Dogmatic pronouncements of the Church have often assured us that moral evil, while it is permitted by God, can never be caused by Him; that human misery and pain, if it cannot be attributed to the malicious will of other people, serves a good purpose—i.e., that it is not really evil. Priests and theologians may have tried to explain the suffering of individuals, particular calamities and atrocities, as parts of a shrewd divine plan, but the Church avoided official comments of this kind; it only advised us to be satisfied with global, unconditional trust.

In fact, we all know that pain and catastrophes are—on the face of it—distributed at random and cannot be interpreted in terms of merits and misdeeds, rewards and punishments. Job knew this as well. Job does not try to construct a theodicy. He has been a just man all his life, and God knows that his misery is not a

retribution for his crimes. He suffers for no reason, but he is able to say: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). He accepts that God alone is the source of wisdom and that His ways are inscrutable. God Himself is angry at Job's advisers, theologians, presumably because they argue that Job's sufferings are the proper punishment for his sins. The whole of the Book of Job seems to refute the theory of pain as just retribution.

This is what God said to Job and his wife many centuries later in Robert Frost's play "A Masque of Reason":

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you
helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed. . . .
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
It had to seem unmeaning to have
meaning. . . .
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.
The only free will there at first was man's,
Who could do good or evil as he chose.
I had no choice but I must follow him
With forfeits and rewards he understood. . . .
I had to prosper good and punish evil.
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
You are the Emancipator of your God.

We see the horror of this: supreme goodness is incompatible with free will as we understand it. In every situation it has only one option: to maximize good. And Job's story changes that: it frees God. He can support the wicked and torment the just, according to His wish or whim. If so, no theodicy is possible or needed. Perhaps a consistent theodicy has never been written?

In various mythologies evil is explained in various ways; gods often share good and

evil qualities, ambiguously. It is beyond the scope of this essay to plunge into the complexities of Hindu and Buddhist theories of evil. Nietzsche said that Buddhism is beyond good and evil. This might be true of some varieties of Buddhism, purified of later mythological imagery. To some Buddhist sages, and presumably to Gautama himself, the world we know from experience is nothing but misery and suffering; there is no liberation, no salvation except through abandoning it. This idea is in fact not alien to many European thinkers. We all remember the immortal words of the dying Socrates: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius." This amounts to saying: here ends the sickness called life.

But this is not a universal belief. Some pantheists and some mystics live lives so immersed in the divine environment that evil is unnoticeable in their universe. The light of God penetrates everything; there is no reason to complain and no point in complaining, for the world is full of joy and "whatever is of God, is God," as Eckhart says. Or, in the words of the seventeenth-century French mystic Louis Chardon, "God in the sky is more my sky than the sky itself; in the sun He is more my light than the sun; in the air He is more the air than the air I breathe."

It may well not seem obvious why the same word should be used for both suffering and moral wickedness. Many thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, identified evil with moral evil. Epictetus says that there is no good or evil in things that do not depend on our will; that the blows of fate we cannot avoid cannot be evil; that we should seek Good and Evil in ourselves; and that a wise man can turn everything into good—illness, death, misery. The only thing in the world that is contrary to God is sin—so says the Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Cudworth—and sin is a non-entity: nothing. God Himself said to Catherine of Siena that no suffering can redeem our guilt, only repentance. And He added that the worst sin is the refusal or mistrust of

divine mercy: the despair of Judas was a greater sin and a worse insult to God than his betrayal of Jesus.

All these considerations suggest that suffering in itself is morally indifferent: only our will, our intentions, our deeds can be morally assessed. It is evil maliciously to inflict pain on other people, but suffering pain is not *an* evil.

If, however, I decide that the word “evil” can be used to describe my intentions but not my suffering, I am thereby suggesting that what other people do is of no interest to me. If they make me suffer, the evil done is not *my* evil, but an evil caused by them. Should I say that my problem is only my own saintliness and not the evil that exists in the world, or the problem of how to make the world better? This might be in keeping with Stoic moral doctrine, but not with common sense, which tells me to condemn not only my own evil but all evil, throughout the human world.

But in that case we might need another restriction. If we limit the word “evil” to what is caused by human will, then its meaning cannot be extended to encompass all suffering: suffering caused by natural forces, or even by human actions if their harmful or painful effects were not intended but happened by accident. And since the word “evil” in this sense clearly has a moral association, if we do apply it to earthquakes, plagues or deaths from lightning, we seem to be implying that such events are intentionally produced: that nothing in nature happens simply as a result of the blind operation of natural laws, that everything happens by design. Such an interpretation is, of course, part of the religious view of the universe, and does not necessarily contradict the belief in the laws of nature. According to many theologians, God, in his omniscience, included natural events in the moral order of the cosmos: they happen by natural necessity, but at the same time they have a moral purpose; they are not miracles that break the chain of cause and effect. Such a view is, in fact, close to the Leibnizian position. And—as Malebranche said

—even if natural events are caused directly by God, and the world is thus an infinite series of miracles, the regularity in the natural order of things remains undisturbed.

As for those who implicitly or explicitly invalidate the “question of evil” for religious reasons, they, of course, believe in good: they believe that good permeates the entire material and spiritual cosmos.

Then there are those who are at the opposite end of both the theological and the anti-theological spectrum, who believe that both “good” and “evil” are no more than mythical inventions. Pleasure and pain exist, of course, and can be explained within the natural order, but in themselves they have no moral qualities. Nothing is good or evil in itself; something can be pleasant or unpleasant, harmful or beneficial, to particular people—to you, to me, to him—and without this qualifier even the words “pleasant” and “unpleasant,” not to speak of the words “good” and “evil,” are meaningless. This is what Hobbes, Hume, and even Spinoza believed (although in the case of Spinoza things are more complicated). Nietzsche says that we do not need the word “evil,” for the world is “bad” enough as it is. But what is “bad”? Something that produces undesirable effects or does not fit the purposes we have in mind. The same idea is suggested by the very title of Konrad Lorenz’s book on aggression, *Das sogenannte Böse: “the so-called evil.”*

Within the naturalistic or materialistic view of reality, the qualities of “good” and “evil” are inadmissible, or useless and misleading, for they suggest that something can possess these qualities in itself, unconditionally and independently of the circumstances, and this suggestion can be suspected of having a religious provenance.

This can be clearly seen in the Marxist or Communist Weltanschauung. Let us take an example from literature.

A character in Solzhenitsyn’s novel *Cancer Ward* visits the zoo and sees an empty cage with a notice on it; the notice says that

the monkey which used to live in that cage was blinded as a result of the mindless cruelty of a visitor: an *evil man* threw tobacco in its eyes.

This notice is a tremendous shock for the visitor. How can it be? An evil man? Not an agent of American imperialism, but simply an evil man? What sort of description is that?

The visitor's shock and amazement were genuine and quite understandable. The adjective "evil" (and no less so the noun) as the description of a moral quality was absent from the ideological jargon of the totalitarian Soviet world. There were, of course, criminals, monsters, traitors, foreign agents—but no one who was simply "evil." This was not only because the quality of being evil might easily have suggested the religious tradition. It also suggested an inherent, lasting property of a person or an act, independent of the political context. But it is obvious to anyone who thinks dialectically that actions which are ostensibly the same kinds of actions can be right or wrong depending on the circumstances, or rather depending on whose name they are performed in. Both Lenin and Trotsky were quite explicit on this point. Is there, for instance, something inherently wrong in slaughtering children?—No. It was right, Trotsky argues, to slaughter the children of the Russian tsar because it was politically expedient. (Presumably it was not right to kill Trotsky's sons, however, because Stalin did not represent the historical interests of the proletariat; Trotsky, as far as I know, did not deal with this question directly, but such an answer would be perfectly in keeping with his fanatical mentality.) If we reject the principle that the end justifies the means, we can only appeal to higher, politically irrelevant moral criteria; and this, Trotsky says, amounts to believing in God.

This is not properly speaking a relativist doctrine; we normally reserve this label for the belief that an act can be good or evil depending on the circumstances. But this is not what the person who thinks dialectically

says. The person who thinks dialectically says that we are never talking about the same action being right or wrong according to the circumstances; the similarity is only ostensible, merely superficial. In one case we are, by eliminating potential enemies of the proletariat, performing an act that is politically right; in the other, we are committing a crime against the mission of the proletariat. Similarly, an act that is an act of liberation of another country from capitalist oppression must not be called an "invasion"; Nazi concentration camps must not be compared with the educational system of a socialist state; and so on. We have scientific knowledge of the progress of history, and thus we know that once everything—including human beings—becomes state property, the way is open to universal rejoicing. And we know what is right and wrong, politically correct and incorrect; we have no need of superstitious descriptions like "evil." There is no point in dwelling on this primitive "dialectics" and mendacious language; it is well known.

What has happened to our question? Need we appeal to the idea of evil at all? May we not be satisfied with the distinction between "pleasant" and "unpleasant" (always relative to person, time and place)? But who would be bold and dogmatically rigid enough to claim that "good" and "evil" are not empirical qualities; that there is no perception of moral qualities, including the intuition of evil; that centuries of human experience, from the indescribable cruelties of ancient Rome to the monstrosities of the twentieth century, are irrelevant to the "question of evil" and may be dismissed as no more than a series of unpleasant impressions (and no one is denying that unpleasant things do happen to people)? I will end with a remark by a French Catholic theologian whose name escapes me; he said that he can understand people who do not believe in God, but the fact that there are people who do not believe in the devil is beyond his comprehension.

Booker vs. Goncourt; or, when silence is a duty

by Anthony Daniels

When I was a child, I tormented my father with questions such as “Which is the best orchestra in the world?” and “Who was the greatest English writer?” In my childish way, I believed such questions were susceptible to unequivocal answers, and if my father, exasperated by my importuning, were foolish enough to answer *ex cathedra*, as was his natural inclination, I would immediately demand to know which was the second best and who was the second greatest: for it seemed to follow, according to my then way of thinking, that if there were a best or greatest, there must be a second and third best and greatest, and so on *ad infinitum*.

No doubt it is the inner child in us all that explains our continued fascination with, and trust in, lists: the world’s richest men, history’s bloodiest dictators, and so forth. It also explains why we continue to believe that prizes must signal some genuine worth in the work of recipients; and just as the fact (of which I was fully aware) that my father had no means of assessing the relative merits of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra did not destroy my confidence in the trustworthiness of his answer, so the repeated award of literary prizes to the wrong authors for the wrong books never seems to destroy their prestige.

But the award of this year’s Booker Prize to D. B. C. Pierre’s first novel, *Vernon God Little*, might—and certainly ought to—

change all that: for it takes a very special kind of person not to recognize the book’s deep and irredeemable, though no doubt socially and culturally representative, trashiness. Even the initials of the author’s pseudonym, D. B. C., tell us quite a lot about the depths to which our culture has sunk: they stand for Dirty But Clean, though they might as well stand for Disgusting But Cunning. The author, we learnt after the prize was awarded to him, is a reformed cocaine addict and confidence trickster, which is no doubt a perfect training nowadays for literary glory.

Meanwhile, across the Channel, the Prix Goncourt is mired in controversy. The winner of the 100th Goncourt was announced earlier than scheduled, to steal the thunder (and sales) of the other French literary prizewinners, a manner of proceeding that called the integrity of the judges (once more) into question. The judges of the Goncourt, unlike those of the Booker but very like African presidents, are appointed for life. They are accused of being too old—the chairman is eighty-three—and thus unsusceptible to the joys of literary experimentation for its own sake. (No one defends aged judges because they might be more likely to judge the books that come before them *sub specie aeternitatis*.) They are also accused of being too close to the four largest French publishers from whom, though unpaid, they derive—so it is said—

all the advantages of crony capitalism. As a result, they favor mediocrity and pass over genuine literary merit—the fact that Céline never won the prize is brought up again and again against the Goncourt system. By contrast, the Booker judges are free spirits, chosen annually, who judge according to their independent lights.

Perhaps the difference between the Goncourt and the Booker is best envisaged as being analogous to that between William and Hillary Clinton: William (the Goncourt) is in it purely for the ride, while Hillary (the Booker) is a true believer in the poison she promotes. If forced to the choice, I prefer William. Better a man with no ideas than the wrong ones. So while the Booker this year is unutterably vile, the Goncourt is merely mediocrity made print.

That *Vernon God Little* is a bad book and its author a bad writer is suggested by its very first sentence: “It’s hot as hell in Martirio, but the papers on the porch are icy with the news.” The word “icy” connotes detachment at the very least, a conscious and ruthless suppression of outward display of emotion: not what newspapers are nowadays best known for, nor how they would react to the news in question, namely the massacre of sixteen children at the local school by a pupil. “It’s cold as hell in Martirio, but the newspapers are burning with the news,” might work as a sentence, just, but not as a description: for Martirio is the name of a small town in Texas (“martyrdom” in Spanish, get it?).

Not every novel can start with a memorable first line: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; There was no possibility of going for a walk that day; It is a truth universally acknowledged; Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure; Every happy family; and so forth. Moreover, even the best books probably contain bad sentences: but those in *Vernon God Little* do not improve. The first paragraph continues:

Don’t even try to guess who stood all Tuesday night in the road. Clue: snotty ole Mrs Lechuga. Hard to tell if she quivered, or if

moths and porchlight through the willows ruffled her skin like funeral satin in a gale. Either way, dawn showed a puddle between her feet.

This combination of ersatz Texan vernacular and strained and imprecise poetic metaphor, put in the eponymous mouth or mind of the sixteen-year-old narrator who is accused of being an accessory to the crime at his school, is so dreadful that the judges must have been motivated by something other than the search for literary merit in making their choice. Since the judges were “accused” of being white, middle class, cultured in the traditional manner, and lacking in proletarian regional accents by an article in *The Observer*, than which no characteristics could be more damaging to their reputations, they no doubt wished to demonstrate their political virtue by broadmindedly awarding a prize to a coprophiliac work that by halfway through the first paragraph has mentioned shit, snot, and piss. Like many of the critics, who were also desperate to distance themselves from traditional (though long dead) notions of propriety and appear hip and sophisticated, they saw in Vernon G. Little a continuation and development of Holden Caulfield’s work, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap kind of crap (to coin a D. B. C. Pierrian phrase).

The vast majority of the metaphors used by Pierre combine puerile obscenity with inexactitude. He is a master of *le mot injuste*. I advise squeamish readers to skip the next few lines (“There is never a page without a very good joke,” in the opinion of one British critic):

The whole subject drags a major tumor out of my ass, don’t fucken ask me why.

Velcro fucken ant-farms seize my gut.

Then her problem would be that she already spent her best whimpery moves; like, she’d have to shred a tit or something . . .

Here’s a woman who pulls the drapes and makes some half-assed conversation if two dogs start screwing in the street. Yet, for all I

know she probably takes a fucken fire-hydrant up the ass every night.

The woman in question is the narrator's mother, of whom he later writes: "Mom whisks the napkin off a tray of pessimistic-looking bakes, offering it up like it was a feel of her tits twenty years ago."

The only justification for this vileness (deemed by one of the Booker judges, the Professor of English at Cambridge University, the best that literature in English had to offer in the year 2003) would be satirical brilliance or authenticity. I think I can claim more than average acquaintance with the lower depths of human feeling and behavior, for example having had as a patient a man who boiled three babies alive, but never have I heard anyone speak of his mother, however hated by him she might have been, in this fashion. Pierre's writing is not authentic but completely false, except in the sense that it betrays an authentic depravity of mind. Though in general it is a mistake to identify an author with his character, in Pierre's case it is perfectly accurate to identify him with his foul-mouthed and fouler-minded adolescent creation. According to an article published in *The Guardian* shortly after he won the prize, he described himself as "freak, dick-head, arsehole, dumb, farting machine." He concluded "I should just fucking shut up."

Quite so. Self-expression is a right, no doubt, but for many people silence is a duty. Pierre is one of their number: and it is with despair that one learns from the half-title page that "D. B. C. Pierre is in the process of writing his second novel."

In fairness, Pierre manages one excellent satirical conceit in his book. Implausibly, his narrator ends up on death row, wrongly convicted of being an accessory to the mass killing at the school. The death row on which he finds himself is now televised, with viewers voting for the condemned man to be executed next. This is legitimate satire, but the idea is weakly developed, and is in any case overwhelmed by the sheer nastiness of the rest of the book.

It is a relief to turn from the vulgar infelicities of Pierre—"trees overhead swish cool hints of warm panties in bedclothes," "I nearly smash into a nest of toilet bowls, abandoned in the undergrowth like a kind of vegetarian pinball machine," "electric piano notes tinkling in the background, soft as ovaries hitting oatmeal," "the vacuum in her ass no longer sucks her hair into a helmy perm," "All I know is . . . that a good life should feel spongy, like a burrito"—to *La maîtresse de Brecht*, by Jacques-Pierre Amette, the winner of the Goncourt. In fact, it would be a relief to turn from Pierre to the telephone directory, which is actually much more interesting than his book for those who know how to read it imaginatively. Amette's book, by contrast, is recognizably that of a civilized man, not that of a savage who has picked up a pen. Here is the description of Brecht's return to Berlin:

He had left Germany on 28 February, 1933. At the time, there were banners and swastikas in all the streets. Now it was 22nd October, 1948. Fifteen hard years had passed. Today, official cars overtook Soviet trucks and the few, badly dressed pedestrians.

Brecht rolled down the window and asked the chauffeur to stop. He got out, lit a cigar and contemplated the ruins. There was a vast silence, a whiteness of the walls, blackened windows, innumerable collapsed buildings. The evening sun, the wind . . . broken down batteries of artillery; a blockhaus.

Not brilliant writing, perhaps, but it at least conveys an atmosphere, and is not grossly exhibitionist, like the man who shouts obscenities in a drawing room.

Unfortunately, all Amette's book does is convey an atmosphere: a sub-Chekhovian evocation of East Berlin during its hardest years. There is not much characterization of Brecht, and certainly no examination of his horrible equivocations. The mistress of the title, a Viennese actress with a compromised past, is set to spy upon him by East German intelligence. She falls in love with her

spymaster, and he with her, but they are destined, by the nature of their task, never to consummate their love for one another. This is the Lady with Lapdog set in Ulbricht's dreary but dangerous capital.

I doubt that *La maîtresse de Brecht* will be read in a hundred years' time, but the award of the prize will at least increase its sales, according to the author, from his usual 10,000 copies to between 200,000 and 300,000 copies. Moreover, it will not actively reduce the cultural level of readers, as the award of the Booker prize to Pierre will do. And this, these days, represents something of a literary triumph.

Despite its effect upon sales, however, I have spoken to no one who takes the Prix Goncourt seriously—rather in the way that no one in *le tout* New York ever voted for Nixon or Reagan. This year, a satire on the prize was published shortly before the announcement of the winner, entitled *Le Truoc-Nog*, by Iégor Gran, which awarded itself the red band of le Prix Truoc-Nog, 2003 (until I got the joke, I assumed it was a small award for the best translation from the Vietnamese).

The satire describes the fate of a French author, called only Goncourageable, who makes it into the finals of the Goncourt. On the one hand, he disdains the prize, knowing that most winners have been consigned within a few years to literary oblivion; on the other, since most French authors are forced by economic circumstances to work as teachers, he desires to win with an avidity that he cannot acknowledge. When Goncourageable reaches the final stages of the whole process, he has a spiritual awakening:

The crisis of lucidity is terrible. Like a serial killer who suddenly realizes the atrocities he has committed, Goncourageable receives the boomerang of his oeuvre full in the face. He understands the unvarnished truth. He ought

never to have written at all. Publisher's filthy trick!

. . . He sees it clearly now! The Goncourt was programed in his work from the very first text as death is written in the genes. Not a doubtful Goncourt, such as was awarded to Proust and Malraux, but a REAL Goncourt, as contemptible as you could wish, an archetypical Goncourt, the quintessence of the system, the great Moloch of literary mediocrity.

At the end of the book, the author suggests an experiment. Try to remember the list of winners. Only a few names come to mind. Then think of all the most important French writers in the century during which the prize has been awarded. There is hardly any overlap at all.

Of course, the French would not think of looking across the Channel to see or to take comfort from the fact that things were even worse there: they always knew that they were, anyway. But the difference between this year's Booker and this year's Goncourt symbolizes a small but important difference between Britain and France. In Britain, what one might call cultural Bolshevism (had the phrase not so unfortunate a past) has swept all before it; in France, the remnant of a bourgeois culture still exists, and is putting up some feeble resistance against complete proletarianization. It is true that intellectuals in France have always been more left-wing than those of Britain, at least in their pronouncements, but they performed their dialectical pirouettes while sitting in cafés and talking to one another, never really meaning what they said or expecting to be taken seriously by a nation that still hordes money in peasant fashion. In Britain, by contrast, with its more pragmatic tradition, the long march through the institutions by the left has been vastly more thorough. The destruction of British culture has therefore been more complete than that of France, in parlous state as the latter might be.

Are emotions moral?

by F. H. Buckley

On October 2, 2002 a sniper shot and killed James D. Martin in the parking lot of Shoppers Food Warehouse in Wheaton, Maryland. Martin was fifty-five and lived in the middle-class suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. There were no witnesses or suspects and nothing to suggest a motive for the crime. Over the next three weeks, the sniper struck thirteen more times. The victims were ordinary people from the Washington area, middle class for the most part, male and female, white, black, Hispanic, and Asian.

The sniper attacks traumatized Washington. A few weeks before, we had observed the first anniversary of September 11. The anthrax investigation was ongoing and many Washingtonians expected another terrorist attack. We read stories of how chemical and nuclear weapons could be smuggled into the United States and set off near a federal building. Some of us thought that the sniper was a Moslem fanatic—and it turned out we were right.

During the three weeks, we all hunkered down. Because the sniper had struck at motorists filling up their cars, people crouched in front of gas stations. Some service stations installed canvas sheets to shroud the pumps, and husbands tanked up their wives' cars. People stayed off the streets, and public events were cancelled. Before the sniper was caught, some worried about whether he would disrupt the local November elections. In Maryland, the sniper at-

racks became an issue in the contest for governor. The Democratic nominee, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, bore a famous name and was favored to win in a heavily Democratic state. Her gun control views weighed against her, however, and the victory of her Republican opponent was in part attributed to the sniper. Townsend's efforts to portray herself as tough on crime didn't wash—even when she said that executing the sniper by lethal injection would be an "absolute no-brainer."

The criminal investigation was in the hands of Charles Moose, the Montgomery county chief of police. Throughout the three weeks, we listened on tenterhooks as local radio stations cut away to one of Moose's frequent press conferences. Moose had little to offer but the encouragement that whatever could be done was being done. It wasn't much, but it helped. Moose is an emotional person, and we were reassured that he took the crisis every bit as seriously as we did. He didn't have to tell us that he was doing everything in his power to arrest the sniper—we knew it from his voice.

We liked it that Moose didn't speak to us in techno-babble. We liked it when he showed his contempt for the snipers. We especially liked it when he blew up at the *Washington Post* for prematurely revealing a lead. And we liked it when he cried as he described the sniper's attack on a child. "Our children do not deserve this. Shooting

a kid. I guess it's getting to be really, really personal now."

All of this took place more than a year ago. The snipers were caught on October 24, 2002 and are now on trial. The sense of terror is gone, and Chief Moose is gone too, hounded out of his job by the *Post* for the book he wrote about the hunt for the snipers.¹

As our fears have receded, so too has the desire to punish the snipers. In the heat of the moment even Kathleen Kennedy Townsend wanted a summary execution. A year later we feel much less emotional about it all, and we have been willing to let justice take its course. By delaying the trial a year, the criminal justice system has itself sought to dampen the emotional response to the killings.

Criminal defense work is not unlike running out the clock in basketball. The goal is to delay the trial through a plethora of motions until the impulse to punish disappears. Rich defendants can run the clock for years, particularly if they are before a *fainéant* judge. Poorer defendants usually come to trial more quickly. The difference greatly advantages the O. J. Simpsons. I feel less angry about the snipers than I did a year ago, much less upset about O. J. Simpson than I did ten years ago. And I feel positively benign about Bluebeard the Pirate.

Other rules of criminal procedure are aimed at weakening the impulse to punish. In the sniper case, the venue of the lead defendant's trial was moved to Virginia Beach, 200 miles from any of the killings, in order to find a dispassionate jury. Defense lawyers also employ their right to dismiss jurors in order to empanel people who will identify with the defendant and not the victim. The very structure of the American courtroom contributes to the sense that we're all in this together. There is no prisoner's box, as there is in England. Nor is the person on trial referred to as the

prisoner, as he is in England; or the accused, as he is in Canada. Here he is simply the defendant, as though he were being sued for breach of contract.

The contest between the individual and the state in a criminal trial is an unequal one, and the consequences of getting it wrong more troubling in criminal than in civil matters. In the language of statisticians, the danger of false positives is greater than that of true negatives. Blackstone expressed the same idea in more familiar language. "It is better," he said, "that ten guilty men go free than one innocent man be found guilty." That is why criminal procedure stacks the deck against the prosecutor. The standard of proof is not the civil burden of the balance of probabilities; instead it is the much more exacting standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt. A good many people are found civilly liable where there was a reasonable doubt about their negligence; and an equal number are acquitted of crimes which they likely committed on a balance of probabilities.

The difference in the burden of proof reflects the libertarian bias in our common law inheritance, and we should not want to change it. What is new are the procedural devices which defense lawyers employ to delay trials until the emotional need to punish is extinguished. That was not part of Blackstone's law. Eighteenth-century trials were conducted expeditiously, as were the executions after a capital sentence was rendered. Blackstone insisted upon the need to get on with it, as delay would weaken the emotional impact of the law.

What Blackstone understood, and what we have forgotten, is that the wheels of justice are oiled by emotion. We do not punish because the wrongdoer treated others as means and not ends, or because he has negative net-present value on some utilitarian calculus. Abstract theories of justice dull us to the difference between the criminal and his victim and cannot compensate us for the economic and psychic costs of punishing a wrongdoer. We need

¹ *Three Weeks in October*, by Charles A. Moose and Charles Fleming; E. P. Dutton, 336 pages, \$23.95.

something more, something provided only by the emotional release that comes from punishing the guilty. We punish because the criminal act was loathsome and the criminal himself hateful.

James Fitzjames Stephen, the Victorian jurist who drafted the Canadian Criminal Code, thought that our morality and criminal law were founded upon an emotional response to wrongdoing. Like John Stuart Mill, Stephen was a member of a prominent liberal, intellectual family. His brother was Leslie Stephen and his niece Virginia Woolf. But Stephen's utilitarianism took a very different form from that of Mill. So far from deprecating social norms, as Mill did, Stephen celebrated them, and in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, written a decade after Mill's *On Liberty*, he argued that "the custom of looking upon certain courses of conduct with aversion [is] the essence of morality."²

Mill's bloodless liberalism had little place for emotion. Consider, said Stephen, the way in which Mill handled the delicate question of what shall be done with a person who, after due deliberation, decides to become a pimp. Mill opposed the imposition of legal sanctions for acts which did not cause harm to others, and where is the harm to others when the transactions are consensual on all sides? Yet, in the end, Mill came down on the side of proscription, for the most delicate of reasons.

Although the public, or the State, are not warranted in authoritatively deciding, for purposes of repression or punishment, that such or such conduct affecting only the interests of the individual is good or bad, they are fully justified in assuming, if they regard it as bad, that its being so or not is at least a disputable question: That, this being supposed, they cannot be acting wrongly in endeavoring to exclude the influence of solicitations which are not disinterested.

2 See "James Fitzjames Stephen v. John Stuart Mill" by Roger Kimball, *Experiments Against Reality* (Ivan R. Dee).

This is poor stuff. Mill's harm-to-others principle has not been violated by the pimp, and we are left with a specious argument which Stephen mercilessly satirized. Here again is Mill, this time as interpreted by Stephen:

Without offence to your better judgment, dear sir, and without presuming to set up any opinion against yours, I beg to observe that I am entitled for certain purposes to treat the question whether your views of life are right as one which admits of two opinions. I am far from expressing absolute condemnation on an experiment in living from which I dissent (I am sure that mere dissent will not offend a person of your liberality of sentiment), but still I am compelled to observe that you are not altogether unbiased by personal considerations in the choice of life which you have adopted. . . . I venture, accordingly, though with the greatest deference, to call upon you not to exercise your profession.

Stephen has a shorter way with the pimp.

You dirty rascal, it may be a question whether you should be suffered to remain in your native filth untouched, or whether my opinion about you should be printed by the lash upon your bare back. That question will be determined without the smallest reference to your wishes or feelings; but as to the nature of my opinion about you, there can be no question at all.

Stephen's argument from repugnance has recently been revived in the debate over cloning. There may be excellent prudential reasons why the prospect of cloning a person is dangerous, but Leon Kass, the chair of the Presidential Council of Bioethics, has advanced a very different kind of argument, based on natural feelings of disgust.

We are repelled by the prospect of cloning human beings not because of the strangeness or novelty of the undertaking, but because we intuit and feel, immediately and without argument, the violation of things that we right-

fully hold dear. Repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress against what is unspeakably profound.³

The belief that our emotions and instincts, including the sense of disgust, are coded with compelling information about how we should live was also a theme of Lionel Trilling's *Middle of the Journey*. Trilling's novel described John Laskell, a man of thirty-three who is recovering from a near-fatal illness at the summer home of his friends Arthur and Nancy Croom. The period is the mid-1930s, and the Crooms are people of the Left. Indeed, many readers thought Trilling had meant to portray Alger and Priscilla Hiss, since Trilling's Gifford Maxim is clearly Whittaker Chambers. The Crooms are solicitous of Laskell's health but uncomfortable with any reminder that he nearly died. They are progressives who instinctively sense that any talk of death is a counter-revolutionary negation of the future. Instead, they place their faith in the proletariat, as represented in their sly and brutish handyman, Duck Caldwell. "He's a very important kind of person," Nancy tells Laskell, "even if you don't consider him just personally." The Crooms are intellectuals and mistrust emotions, but bristle with hatreds they cannot acknowledge. They detest Maxim for breaking with the Communist Party, but call him insane. And when Caldwell cruelly strikes his child and unwittingly causes her death, Laskell and the Crooms are repulsed by him without understanding why. It is left to Maxim to explain that those who fail to recognize their repugnance to evil can become its willing accessories.

The argument from our emotions is Burkean. The English, said Burke, "are generally men of untaught feelings," so that "instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves,

we cherish them because they are prejudices." This was an older use of prejudice, synonymous with sentiment or passion as opposed to reason. As a motive to action, prejudice offers a surer guide than reason, said Burke.

We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the general wisdom which prevails in them.

The appeal to prejudice was a thumb in the eye to English political rationalists such as Dr. Richard Price, the dissenting minister whose sermon in support of the French Revolution led Burke to write his *Reflections*. Burke contrasted Price's didactic sermon with the theater, which must move our emotions to succeed, and which he thought must therefore afford more reliable moral instruction. "No theatric audience in Athens would bear what has been borne" by Dr. Price's friends. In this sense, our emotions are wiser than our reason. Our sense of pity for the victims of the Revolution told us of horrors to which reason was blind.

In Goya's celebrated drawing, the sleep of reason brings forth monsters. But the sleep of passion may also be murderous. Political theorists like John Rawls who seek to explain why we should pursue justice cannot persuade us that we should first care about other people. That is left for tragedy. By awakening pity, tragedy teaches us that sympathy and love are prior to justice and desert. "O reason not the need," groans Lear, when Goneril and Regan bargain down the number of his retainers. Lacking love, they will break their promises to him, for reason can always find a justification for injustice. Goneril and Regan promised the most extravagant love for their father; Cor-

³ "The Wisdom of Repugnance" by Leon Kass, *The Ethics of Human Cloning* (AEI).

delia promised only to love “according to her bond.” But her promise was credible, since her natural attachment was sincere. “I stumbled when I saw,” said Lear, and we too see more clearly when we rely on our intuitions and emotions in addition to our unguided reason.

The very distinction between reason and passion is often suspect. Cartesian dualists identify emotions with mere feelings, like heat or cold, or with the brute physiological events to which they are correlated. Emotions are more than that, however. The distinction between feelings and calculation may be blurred and many of our judgments are as much one as the other. So thought Joseph de Maistre, who mocked philosophical deliberations about the rights of man. “I never saw a man,” said Maistre. “I saw Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, but as for the creature man I never met one in my life.”

Our distaste for liars is both an aversion and a sense of the harm they may impose upon us, with the aversion economizing on cost-benefit analysis. We don’t have to calculate the harm they might impose—we simply know we don’t like them. Similarly, feelings of boredom or disgust provide us with useful stopping rules that shortcircuit wasteful mental calculation. Our natural tendency to imitate others also usefully prevents us from continuing on where others have stopped. Finally, a simple preference may take charge and tell us to stop calculating and get on with it. We might spend an endless amount of time in search of the perfect mate, but falling in love tells us to stop. As does our mate.

Once before, in the nineteenth century,

we prized emotion over reason, and we are not finished with the nineteenth century. But it is different today. We are no longer encumbered with the political baggage of Romanticism, whose Blood and Earth spawned bestial political theories in the twentieth century. In addition, the idea that our emotions are an intelligent way of responding to choices dominated by desires finds a home across the academy, in disciplines that did not exist in Coleridge’s day. The counter-revolution in the cognitive sciences which endows our emotions and instincts with innate intelligence has created interdisciplinary alliances amongst psychologists such as Gerd Gigerenzer and Antonio Damasio, economists such as Vernon Smith and Robert Frank, philosophers such as Jon Elster and Robert Solomon, evolutionary biologists such as Robert Trivers and Steven Pinker, political theorists such as Frank Fukuyama, natural lawyers like Larry Arnhalt, and poets such as Fred Turner, all of whom recognize their common intellectual bonds as well as the chasm which separates them from the Enlightenment tradition’s abstract rationalism.

This is not to attribute inerrancy to our emotions. In truth there are no infallible guides, or if they exist seldom speak *ex cathedra*. We cannot say that laughter never did betray the heart that loved her, as Wordsworth said of nature. Nothing on earth does that, and particularly not nature. The breakdown of racial prejudice in America was a positive good. It does not follow, however, that our emotions are presumptively untrustworthy, and that moral questions are always to be decided according to the dictates of pure reason unaided by emotion.

New poems

by William Logan

The ghost

The shabby, dishonored, unnamed ghost
who haunted my parents' dream life like a guest

must have been, I realized thirty years late,
my father's alcoholic father, who, light

on his feet, jitterbugged through our Pittsburgh childhood
with debts, girlfriends, his leathery moods—

a figure beyond our suburban world.
When his car roared up, my mother's lips curled

downward, not that we cared, glad for his hoarse
attentions, his dark growl-laugh, the source,

I now know, of my father's apish guffaws.
Why didn't we recognize his flaws,

the headaches that kept him in bed, weekend mornings,
his lack of a job? There must have been other warnings,

and yet we were too young for the secrets slurred
in every sentence, almost every word.

Only once, I recall, did we visit him.
Somewhere in Ohio, caretaker at a nursing home—

no, a funeral parlor! A third wife vaguely in attendance.
(They lived, perhaps, upstairs?) The memories make no sense,

not that it matters; but, without him, would
my father's life have been plain sailing? Almost good?

They were both drawn, despite a lack of guile,
to the trumpeting, sad world of sales,

where, one wounded summer, as if into my inheritance,
I walked our suburb's rackety fences,

trying to peddle steak knives, carving knives,
to wary, bewildered, perfumed wives.

My father saw my discouragement, and then despair,
and rescued me from it. Life is not fair.

Why, now, remember the vain, pasty man
who, one winter morning, waltzed into the kitchen

to demand breakfast from my mother, and perhaps more,
though he had died three years before?

It took the rest of her life to settle the score.

The death of Ovid

The arched trees flare against the early leaf.
Against the spent horizon, like a scrawl,
gold clouds have worked a naked bas-relief.
The smoke of raging fires casts a pall.

Zero hour

Bittern, hawk, and osprey tend
in their private circles near
orders scrawled across the page,
though the willing victims send
postcards to another age
gazing up in fear.

Alligators known to dwell
in the analytic root
theorize about the will.
Frequently consigned to hell,
inconvenient villains still
prepare to shoot.

Will indignant vultures perch,
waiting for the halt and weak
on whose bounty they descend?
In a large and vacant church,
words whose meanings some defend
have yet to speak.

Three phases of culture

i. The anthropologist

Their land was barren of all habitation,
their tribal structure hard to understand
and useless to the business of a nation.
He gasped and saw a dead thing in his hand.

He asked the natives what they called each creature.
Their gods refused to answer to a name,
but linguists said the language had a feature—
the words for different sex acts were the same.

The missionaries soon were past all caring
and fell to worship of a giant stone.
What chiefs remained were naked and despairing.
What did they want? Their wishes were unknown.
It could be said that they excelled in swearing
and like us wanted to be left alone.

ii. The malady

There was an emptiness of sea and sky,
a barren outlook from deserted peaks.
Call out a name, and there was no reply.
The letters had been postage-due for weeks.

Each family saw a cast of strangers there,
each marriage had grown stale with gelid lust.
The women wondered how to fix their hair,
the men pulled out their wallets and found rust.

Nothing was certain when the bill came due.
Even the tides did not run true to form.
When death had been delayed a year or two,
in their cold mirrors lovers found a norm.
Why would a people so entranced with looks
console themselves by burning all their books?

iii. The phony war

Some weeks had passed. The lust for war had faded.
Cows were now pastured beneath disputed oaks.
In dangerous woods, fresh-planted vines invaded
graves whose mere rumor was declared a hoax.

The politicians drank a dry champagne
from icy sideboards ruled by flocks of swans.
Perched on a soapbox, the veteran complained
about the crossing of the Rubicon.

A general beleaguered by his debts
ordered a new battalion on patrol.
The cold accountant in his rifle hole
counted out a store of cigarettes.
A dreaming cannon shifted in repose.
On the great bourse, the price of bellies rose.

Sculpture in Dallas

by Karen Wilkin

Sculpture isn't easy. As that hoary artists' joke goes, it's what you bump into when you back up to look at a painting. Unlike paintings, which (for the most part) stay decorously on the wall and can even escape scrutiny, sculpture is unequivocally *there*, physically present and unignorable. Sculpture of the last half century is even more insistent, refusing to remain isolated on a pedestal, but instead competing for the very space we occupy. Sculpture can make rude demands on our sense of ourselves. Even the most stripped-down, minimal works ask to be perceived through our awareness of our own bodies, forcing us to draw upon our accumulated experience of how it feels to occupy space, to move, to resist gravity, to touch. And there are practical considerations, as well. Despite their considerable heft, sculptures can often be fragile or, if they are big enough and unwieldy enough, they can even pose life-threatening risks. The expense and logistical challenges of moving and installing large, heavy objects are so daunting that museums think long and hard before organizing sculpture exhibitions, while the difficulties of storage and handling can even make them reluctant to acquire sculpture. And because of all of these concerns, serious private collectors of sculpture are very rare beasts indeed.

All of which makes the advent of the newly opened Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas pretty close to miraculous. Dedicated to what its director, Stephen A. Nash, de-

scribes as "the exhibition, study, appreciation, and conservation of Modern and contemporary sculpture," the Center will offer the public rotating exhibitions drawn from a dazzling private collection of works spanning the late nineteenth century to the present, installed in an elegant building by Renzo Piano; large-scale pieces are distributed through an adjoining two-acre sculpture garden designed by Piano and the landscape designer Peter Walker. Like all sites associated with miracles, the Center should rapidly become a place of pilgrimage. As the Michelin guides say, it is not only worth a detour, but worth a journey.

This wonderful new institution owes its existence to the passion and generosity of Raymond Nasher and his late wife, Patsy, a remarkable couple who were sufficiently obsessed with sculpture—especially modern sculpture—to have collected it for almost four decades, beginning in the mid-1960s. The Nashers' life as collectors began even earlier, however, when they traveled to Mexico in 1950 and became interested in pre-Columbian art. During the years that followed, they gradually acquired what became a significant group of ethnographic and archaeological objects from ancient Latin America. Before long, though, their interest shifted to American Modernist painting, in part because of the helpful influence of the formidable Edith Halpert, the director of the legendary Downtown Gallery in New York and a champion of artists

such as Stuart Davis and Jacob Lawrence. By the mid-1960s, the Nashers had begun to concentrate on Modern sculpture. Following the purchase of a major bronze by Jean Arp, they soon acquired important works by Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, and Isamu Noguchi. The couple continued to buy paintings, but their future direction was established.

These changes in focus are probably not as surprising as they might seem. Patsy Nasher is reported to have been “a born collector” with an appetite for, in addition to art, political buttons, Navajo weavings, Gypsy and pre-Columbian jewelry, and more. Nash remembers Patsy saying “We never thought of ourselves as collectors with a capital C—we just bought what pleased us.” But their decision to pay most attention to sculpture may have been inevitable. According to Nash, Raymond Nasher believes that his early interest in pre-Columbian and tribal art was an important foundation for his later appreciation of modern work in three-dimensions, and he believes, too, that his experience as a builder and developer “sharpened his eye for sculpture and its ‘constructed,’ spatial qualities.” Whatever the motivation, the collection has continued to grow and evolve. As the Nashers became increasingly involved and knowledgeable, their choices became more sophisticated, the collection as a whole more refined and comprehensive. The core collection of pieces acquired in the 1960s, by Arp, Moore, Hepworth, Noguchi, Calder, and Miró—all well-known, deservedly admired but, for the time, not particularly adventurous sculptors—was expanded to include more unpredictable works that document the entire trajectory of twentieth-century sculpture in all its aspects, from figuration to abstraction: a fine selection of Auguste Rodin’s, a stunning group of Medardo Rosso’s enigmatic wax on plaster figures, a mouth-watering assortment of Henri Matisse’s bronzes, eight David Smiths, and signature works by living artists, including Anthony Caro,

Claes Oldenburg, Donald Judd, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Richard Serra, and more. Historical gaps have been filled, strong suits have been reinforced, rarities have been added, and works by younger artists, such as Richard Deacon, Martin Puryear, Anish Kapoor, Scott Burton, and (inevitably) Jeff Koons, have joined those of their distinguished forebears. Today, the Nasher collection includes more than 350 works, mostly sculptures. The cumulative effect, especially in relation to the historical portion, is of a nearly ideal selection of key pieces, chosen both because of their excellence and their place in the story of modern art by an acute, informed eye.

Initially, there were practical considerations for concentrating on three-dimensional works. Raymond Nasher’s real estate development business provided him with opportunities for what he described in a 1996 interview as “linking art with commercial spaces,” which translated into installing large sculptures in public places. As an astute businessman, he quickly realized that “sculpture cost less than paintings of comparable quality. A Matisse sculpture might be a tenth the price of a Matisse painting but could be every bit as good, if not better.” You got more for your money, too; speaking at one of the opening events of the Center, Nasher rather endearingly remarked that “with a painting you have only one composition, but with a sculpture you have 360 compositions, when you walk around it.” But the couple’s real motivation was pure, unbridled enthusiasm. “Mostly it was because we loved the physicality and presence of sculpture,” Nasher has said, an assertion borne out by the fact that, until the opening of the Center, the cream of the collection was for many years installed throughout the interior and grounds of the Nashers’ Dallas home.

As the collection grew, so did its reputation. Obtaining loans from the Nashers began to be an important aspect of organizing just about any serious exhibition of modern sculpture. In 1987–1988, a show drawn from the collection traveled to Dal-

las, Washington, D.C., Madrid, Florence, and Tel Aviv. In 1996 and 1997, an even more ambitious exhibition of about a hundred works, accompanied by a substantial publication, was seen at the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco and the Guggenheim in New York. It was this increasing attention, the Center's director says, that encouraged the Nashers to begin thinking about the necessity of keeping their increasingly rich, increasingly thorough survey of modern and contemporary sculpture together and to consider, too, ways of making it available to a larger public. Both before and after Patsy Nasher's death, various ideas, ranging from turning the couple's Dallas home into a house-museum to giving the collection and an endowment to an existing museum, were explored and rejected. Finally, the decision was taken to create a new, autonomous institution, financed by the Nasher Foundation. Dallas, where Nasher's business had prospered, and where his wife and children were born, was chosen as the location. After more than five years of effort, the result was this fall's opening of the Nasher Sculpture Center, an island of urban felicity and rationality amid the distinctly infelicitous sprawl of downtown Dallas, located just across the road from the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts—a new essential destination for anyone interested in modern sculpture.

The opening exhibition was a showcase of the collection's strengths: nearly a hundred works, all sculptures except for about half a dozen Picasso paintings and one Giacometti oil, ranging from Rodin's spectacular little study for the head of Balzac, in plaster, (1897), a masterpiece of wrenched volumes, to a site-specific "skyspace" by James Turrell, permanently installed at the far end of the sculpture garden and still under construction when I visited during the opening week in October. Most of the works were exhibited in the galleries of both levels of Piano's museum building, with twenty-four larger pieces sited in the garden. Quite simply, it's sculpture (and architecture) heaven.

Piano's building is the next thing to perfection. It is deceptively modest, self-effacing, and ravishing. The plan seems simple—a row of relatively narrow, sensitively proportioned bays, glazed at either end, washed with light. From the street, which the museum assertively defines—atypically for Dallas and all the more striking because of that—we see through the building, into the garden, so that even casual passersby are alerted to the presence of something extraordinary within and beyond. The walls throughout are uninterrupted planes of pale travertine, honed for the indoor sections and left slightly rougher in the projections beyond the glass walls, with the pale, neutral palette reinforced by oak floors. Deep overhangs shelter the glass street and garden facades. The sequence of narrow bays, crowned with gently curving barrel vaults, is obviously a subtle homage to Louis Kahn's iconic Kimbell Museum in nearby Fort Worth, but Piano's version of the motif is very much his own—and from a curator's point of view, an easier space in which to install exhibitions, since each bay remains discrete. The light in the skylit galleries is glorious, filtered through a precision-cast system of aluminum "cells," angled to the north to deflect and diffuse the intense Texas sun. (A few mean-spirited types have mentioned that no one yet knows how to clean the skylights, but I'm sure they'll figure something out before long.) The rhythm of the bays is so clear, the sequence of spaces so pleasurable, the details so exquisitely considered, that the building seems deceptively small and intimate. In fact, it is surprisingly generous. In addition to the two ample galleries on the street level floor and a combined entry hall and exhibition space, there is a lower-level gallery, apparently for works with particularly stringent climate control requirements, and an auditorium—also on the lower level—with a dramatic stairway-cum-bleacher connecting it to the garden and an openable window wall that permits transformation into an outdoor theater. There are also offices, spaces dedicated to conservation and edu-

cation, and all the usual present-day museum requirements of gift shop and a fairly serious café.

The opening exhibition is entitled "From Rodin to Calder: Masterworks of Modern Sculpture from the Nasher Collection" and for once the word "masterworks" is completely appropriate.¹ The nine Matisse bronzes on view include many indispensable to an understanding of his achievement as a sculptor, beginning with his earliest effort in three dimensions, the Rodinesque, nervously modeled *Serf* (1900–1904, cast c. 1912). The selection also includes the Michelangelo-inspired *Reclining Nude I (Aurora)* (1907), with her swelling hip and sharply contrasted articulations, and the voluptuous *Large Seated Nude* (1922–1929, cast 1952), luxuriously relaxing against the air, plus a good many significant works made in between. Most arresting, perhaps, is a plaster version of the sinuous standing figure, *Madeleine I* (1901, cast 1903). The light, matte surface changes our perceptions of this familiar sculpture, forcing us to pay new attention to Matisse's broad, smudgy modeling instead of concentrating on profiles, as the sleek dark patina of his bronzes often encourages us to do. But there's more to it than that. The presence of this unusual piece alerts visitors to one of the most fascinating aspects of the Nasher Collection—that along the way you will encounter a significant number of surprises in the form of alternative versions, like the plaster *Madeleine I*, of well-known, even canonical, works, along with rare or extremely fragile sculptures, works by artists under-represented in American collections, and more.

The selection of Giacomettis is also impressive, particularly for the inclusion of early, African-influenced Cubist and Surrealist works in addition to a group of more

expected, but no less well chosen, attenuated standing female nudes and a trio of bottom-heavy, blade-headed painted bronzes of the artist's brother, Diego, their individuality of proportion, inflection, and mass emphasized by seeing them in close proximity. Elsewhere in the street-level galleries, the wide-ranging story of modernism is told by Julio González's angular, staccato *Woman with a Mirror* (c. 1936–1937, cast 1980), a convincing bronze version of one of the Catalan master's most characteristic works, originally constructed with disparate pieces of iron, plus a textbook selection of first-rate examples by such diverse artists as Naum Gabo, Jacques Lipchitz, and Isamu Noguchi. Picasso is well-enough represented, although the most powerful and interesting of Nasher's Picasso holdings is not on view at the moment. The plaster version of the well-known Cubist *Head (Fernande)* (1909), believed to have been made for use in editioning the bronzes of this iconic sculpture, is currently in the exhibition "The Cubist Portraits of Fernande Olivier," organized by the National Gallery, Washington, D.C.; it will come to the Nasher Sculpture Center in mid-February.

Nasher's holdings of David Smith's sculpture are among the real strengths of the collection, a marvelous cross-section of this American giant's protean *oeuvre*. The selection encompasses every thing from one of his earliest welded iron heads of the 1930s to one of the great "chariots," *Voltri VI* (1962), a magnificent conflation of Smith's awareness of Etruscan sculpture, Classical torsos, Barnett Newman's and Helen Frankenthaler's paintings, and his own restless imagination, made in an abandoned Italian steel factory and heralding the astonishing series of compelling large-scale works Smith produced in the three remaining years of his life. Smith's spooky, surrealizing works of the 1940s are well represented, as are his pivotal, generously scaled linear works of the 1950s. Almost every aspect of his endlessly inventive conception of what sculpture could be can be traced, including his life-long fascination with polychromy. The only lacuna is Smith's

1 "From Rodin to Calder: Masterworks of Modern Sculpture from the Nasher Collection" opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center on October 20, 2003 and remains on view through January 2004.

exploration of planar construction in stainless steel in the mid-1960s, but since the collection continues to grow, that lack may be temporary.

Stephen Nash's installation of Smith's work includes a delightful inside joke that is also art historically informative. González's small iron construction *Mask: Reclining Head* (c. 1930) occupies the same plinth as a group of Smiths of the 1930s and 1940s. It's a nice reminder that it was González's first constructed metal sculptures, which the young American saw in photographs, along with Picasso's, in the influential French magazine *Cahiers d'Art*, that in 1933 inspired Smith to apply his welding skills to sculpture-making in the first place. What is even more relevant is that a couple of small Gonzálezes belonging to his friend, the painter John Graham, were among the very few modernist sculptures Smith was able to see first-hand during these crucial years. One was a small mask, not unlike the Nashers', which Graham later gave to Smith.

Downstairs at the Center, some particularly choice treasures are installed in an interior room, protected from even the indirect sun of the upper galleries. Most dramatic, perhaps, are a notable number of Medardo Rosso's mysterious, elusive waxes. (It is virtually impossible to see such a representative selection of works by this strange sculptor anywhere else in this country.) The blurred heads and schematic upper bodies of Rosso's fragmented figures are all restless surface, yet they seem to retreat from the eye, in spite of their delicate three-dimensional articulations. Paradoxically, we see *into* them as much as we experience them as swelling expanses. They are patently self-sufficient, rather than wall-dependent reliefs, but their relation to their surroundings is equivocal. They don't so much displace space as loom up in it, seemingly dragging bits of setting with them, yet at the same time, they are wholly *sculptural*. Rosso's highly simplified head of a sick child is only one step away from Brancusi's enigmatic, essential forms. (A

Rosso show organized by Harvard will be at the Center beginning in April.)

But the Rossos, fascinating as they are, are not the only jewels in the lower level "treasury." There's that head of Balzac in plaster and a plaster version of Rodin's *Age of Bronze* (c. 1876) that transforms our ideas about this familiar work just as the plaster *Madelaine I* makes us rethink Matisse. In the same way, Paul Gauguin's limbless *Torso of a Woman* (c. 1896), robustly modeled in clay, made me change my mind about this problematic painter's abilities as a sculptor. I've been skeptical of many of Gauguin's faux-primitive carvings, but the powerful, introspective presentness of the Nasher Center's clay sculpture, along with its thoughtful modulations of form, will make me look again at the carvings.

Encyclopedic as the Nasher Collection is these days, it happily still seems to retain some of the quirks that make private collections especially interesting. A disproportionate emphasis on Raymond Duchamp-Villon's swoopy, streamlined efforts—sculptures perhaps better described as *Moderne* than *modernist*—is a case in point. "Patsy didn't think that Duchamp-Villon was an especially important artist," Nasher has explained, "whereas I happened to think that he was one of the greatest! . . . I just thought he was wonderful. She totally disagreed." Such idiosyncratic choices not only have charm, but can also broaden your conception of how the untidy story of modernism can be told. It's a nice surprise, for example, to come upon Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's bombastic portrait head of Ezra Pound (1914)—Cubism on steroids—or a fragile polychrome relief, made about 1915–1916, by the seldom-seen Russian constructivist Ivan Puni.

The Center's holdings, at least as revealed by the opening exhibition and its handsome catalogue (an updating of the one that accompanied the 1996 exhibition), tell another story, as well. They offer insight into what has been possible for even the most dedicated and ambitious collectors of

modern sculpture in recent years. Brancusi, for example, is represented less thoroughly than the Nashers apparently would have liked, but little has been available—which is not to diminish the importance of the collection's early, naturalistic head of a child and its delectable, pre-1914 plaster cast of *The Kiss* (1907–1908), in the version in which the embracing arms have not yet been reabsorbed into the block. Lack of availability probably accounts, too, for the paucity of Edgar Degas's urgently modelled figures and the conspicuous absence of Picasso's pioneering iron and steel constructions of the late 1920s, even though both are essential to an understanding of modernism, the Degases because they rethink the figure as radically as anything by Rodin, and the Picassos because they, along with his colleague and compatriot González's constructions, announce a new conception of sculpture not as eloquent mass but as expressive cage. But as I say, the collection still seems to be growing.

I wish I could say that the garden is as seductive and magical as Piano's building or that the work installed in the garden was as exhilarating as that in the galleries. The garden, qua garden, is a thoughtful orchestration of impeccably chosen plant material, natural and man-made textures, and water, an inventive and disciplined dialogue between geometry and the irregularities of growth. As a setting for Piano's cool, restrained pavilion, it works beautifully, and, as a green, watery haven in a not very appealing part of Dallas, it is perfectly wonderful. I am told that it has been engineered so that large, heavy works may be installed, and visitors can wander across the grass to look closely at sculptures without doing damage. So far, so good. But I'm not convinced that it is an ideal setting for sculpture. At the moment, it seems busy, too much in competition with the works them-

selves; maybe a season's rapid growth under the Texas sun will solidify things.

It may be simply that most of what has been installed outside is not at the same exalted level of the work inside—which is not to say that there aren't some splendid, richly rewarding pieces to be discovered in the garden, from a sensuous Maillol seated woman, all swelling volumes and suave curves, to a first-rate William Tucker abstraction from 1978—a kind of outlined “torso” punctuated by short right-angled “strokes”—that at once sums up his earlier investigations of measure and interval, and points ahead to his years of exploring the implications of modeling, massing, and implied figuration. But some of the outdoor works are rather pedestrian and a few of them seem dangerously close to being merely trendy, especially in comparison to the rock solid virtues and high standard of excellence that prevails within. It doesn't help that one of the finest of Nasher's sculptures by a living artist, Anthony Caro's seminal *Sculpture Three* (1961), with its delicately poised chunks of I-beam and tense horizontal extension, has been badly sited, tucked into one of the sheltering bays on the garden side of the pavilion. It looks better, isolated against the grass, when it is seen from inside the building, from the director's office and the meeting room—obviously a tribute to the esteem in which the staff holds the piece—but that view is not available to the general public. (The color of *Sculpture Three* looks a little off, too, as though it had recently been repainted in not quite the right green.) In the face of such abundant delights, it seems ill-mannered to complain of anything—although I would like someone to check a sample of that green paint against the artist's records. Most of all, I'm looking forward to my next visit. I suspect that the Nasher Sculpture Center is about as close to sculpture paradise as I am likely to get.

Strange fruit

by James Panero

As this issue goes to press, it is announced that a remarkable discovery has been made in the Swabian Mountains along the Upper Danube: ancient figurative art, the product of Late Stone Age artists living 30,000 years ago, has been uncovered in a cave. Yet equally remarkable, and perhaps less reported, have been the concurrent exhumations at the site: the original exhibition catalogue and press kit; fliers on the speaking series and tour schedule; a note of thanks from the curator; a graduate student dissertation titled “The Cave as Abject Symbol in Contemporary Figurative Art” (unpublished); and a dog-eared copy of *The New Yorker*, found in the lavatory, from the Shawn era. Taken together, these discoveries may serve to dispel the notion that the art of the period was far more primitive than our own.

Yet even for our Paleolithic Michaelangelos, it would be unusual for such a culture to rise to the sophisticated high-water mark of the current art scene. 30,000 years hence, when scholars document the petrified edition of the December 15, 2003 *New Yorker*, they will be confronted by a photograph of the painter John Currin, taken by Richard Avedon. It appears alongside Peter Schjeldahl’s review of Currin’s 2003–2004 Whitney exhibition.¹ What will our descendants make of this artifact? In Avedon’s photograph, for example, the forty-one-year-old artist is pictured with a baby—one assumes,

his own—clenched in his palms. The baby is held not so much in a loving embrace but rather away from Currin’s body as a sort of talismanic rattle. Mazeltov! It’s a boy! Some scholars may identify this as a real-world symbol of Currin’s hammed-up heterosexual posturing. Others may claim that this is a theatrical tableau of Currin’s post-post-modern naked ambition. Still others might say that this is simply a nice family portrait. Gosh. Can anything compare to the sedimentary layering of meaning and counter-meaning in early twenty-first-century art? Schjeldahl writes:

Currin is important philosophically for calling the bluff of postmodern theorists who reject myths of progress in art while maintaining avant-gardist postures that lean on those myths. If, after all, we are not striding a hallelujah trail to Utopia—if the past, far from being left behind, inundates the present, and high and low culture defy being separated—

1 “John Currin” opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on November 20, 2003, and remains on view through February 22, 2004. The exhibition was previously on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (May 3–August 24, 2003) and the Serpentine Gallery, London (September 9–November 2, 2003). A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Serpentine Gallery in association with Harry N. Abrams (120 pages, \$35).

why not directly avail ourselves of whatever, having once pleased, may please anew?

Our descendants will only marvel.

John Currin is the cultural equivalent of a pop diva singing “Strange Fruit” while under the impression that she is, in fact, Billie Holiday. Currin is a camp artist performing a straight piece with a straight face. At mid-career and already a top seller, he matches the retardaire idea of putting paint to canvas and an ebullient appreciation for the Old Masters with a surrealist touch and a Hilton-sister sensibility. The results are flat as a pancake, soul-free, alluring to an aggressive degree: stock set-pieces of Uncle Sam gents embraced by beach-blanket belles (*Lovers* [1993], *The Neverending Story* [1994], *Twenty-three Years Ago* [1995]); yuppie snapshots of the upper-middle classes at play (*Park City Grill* [2000], *Stamford After-Brunch* [2000]); guppie domestic bliss (*Homemade Pasta* [1999], *Two Guys* [2002]); pug-nosed nymphettes descended from Alexandre Cabanel heaven (*Girl on a Hill* [1995]; *SuperAngel* [1995]); and a panoply of gallivanting nudes seemingly set loose from the Ecole de Fontainebleau. The results can be tempting, especially in Currin’s more culturally ambiguous images (*Nude with Raised Arms* [1998] and notably *The Berliner* [1994], the most nuanced piece of the show).

After riding the art-gallery industrial average for ten years, Currin is now enjoying his first big American museum exhibition. Currin may be able to paint a send-up of Andrea Mantegna’s *Dead Christ* suitable for the nose-cone of a B-17 (*Nude on a Table* [2001]), but is he really following in the tradition of the masters? As this artist has emerged from the critical backwater of glossy magazine spreads to claim his crown as a post-PC chic painter, some critics have championed this line of reasoning. But is it true? For all the *Cosmo* faces grafted onto baroque nudes, Currin’s saccharine canvases rarely rise above the sense of a pop-tune breaking into the top-forty: high produc-

tion value and a catchy hook wedded to a nice ass. For something to be invested in Currin’s artistic milieu something from it would have to emerge, and Currin’s creative alchemy—devoid of ideas beyond profit and visual appeal—seems to inspire little in return. Artists like Alex Katz, Elizabeth Peyton, and William Bailey (Currin’s influential teacher at Yale) have already set forth more lasting examples. Currin may represent a flush of nascent discontent over the stranglehold of the political and the pious in art (“I want to have a Barney-free day,” he recently told a reporter). Yet, like his contemporary Lisa Yuskavage, Currin appears to lack the motivation as well as the ability to apply his talents beyond a narrow, cautious scope. Just to dispel any doubt, he regularly undercuts his own foppish skills with immature diction and a dim line of reasoning:

You go to Greece today and think, are these the people who made this stuff? Then you realize, no, they aren’t the people who made this stuff.

You don’t think of Jesus’s penis or his musculature as a particularly important aspect of Christianity. . . . I think [Jasper] Johns’s brushstrokes are a bit like gay images of Jesus by Mannerist painters. . . . When Johns makes a flaccid AbEx painting, it allows him to make a big boner of a Johns painting.

So I realized that high culture in the form of masterpieces is kind of my vice. Not in the sense that I make them, but I am enthusiastic about them. I remember once when I visited an art school and this snotty, hotshot kid said, “Oh, you believe in masterpieces, don’t you?” And he was making this kind of run-of-the-mill German-looking painting, and I thought, “Of course I believe in masterpieces, you fool!” Believing in a masterpiece means believing in a totally transcendent kind of heroic performance.

This sort of talk may ring true over pints at the grad bar, but such art-theory chatter does

not stand up in the cold light of day. Just as *The New York Times Magazine* of December 14 adjudicated on an “instantly passé trend,” the backlash against Currin is metered out measure for measure with the hype. “The formerly linear lifespan of a trend, from hot to not, now resembles something closer to a Mobius strip,” wrote Adam Sternbergh. So it is written in the Book of Camp for John Currin.

Across town—that is, across the river—at MOMA QNS, an exhibition from the Department of Prints and Books, stealing some of the limelight from the mighty Department of Painting and Sculpture, has opened with an ambitious exhibition of another art superstar, eight years Currin’s senior. Kiki Smith, the yin to Currin’s yang, appears counterposed in many respects to her younger contemporary, yet how these bright young things shine with similar light.² Whereas Currin is a camp painter working with straight material, Smith is a supercilious artist who takes camp images and irons them flat. Both fall back on exaggerated sexual identity; the vagina is never far from Smith’s stock of images (for example, one footnote in Wendy Weitman’s catalogue reads: “Smith sees a formal resemblance between the vagina and the eye of a peacock feather.”)

The rest of Smith’s witchy performance—her nest of hair, a gothic wardrobe, Irish-Catholic diabolism, artistic collectivism, an interest in creepy animals and birds—derives not from ancient cults or even Huysmans and Poe but from a matrix of B-movies, just as Currin once drew on the camp über-idol Bea Arthur for an early portrait (he also, according to a footnote, once lent Kiki Smith a stuffed fawn). Most of Smith’s oeuvre can be deduced, for instance, from a single showing of Mario Bava’s cult classic *Black Sunday*

(1960), where the witch Asa, played by Barbara Steele, is accidentally resurrected in her tomb by a drop of blood and proceeds to terrorize the Victorian descendants of her executioners, including the virginal Katia (also played by Steele). Smith’s work almost always fits into this scenario.

How does such an interest translate into “prints, books, and things”? One example is *Untitled (Book of Hours)* (1986/2003), a stack of 365 pages of “handmade Twinrocker paper” rubber-stamped in gothic lettering with words like “urine,” “tears,” “pus,” “blood”—all stock ingredients of the witch’s proverbial brew. *Constellations* (1996), a “lithograph on six attached sheets of handmade Nepalese paper, three with flocking,” depicts the pock-marked, craggy face of the artist as though arisen from a sepulchral slumber. One also finds serial drawings of werewolves, owls, owl pellets, dead birds, frogs, bats, small road-kill, the moon, butterflies (with more vaginas), multiple self-images, hair, lactating breasts, and so forth, with titles like (to pick the first ten alphabetically): *All Souls* (1988), *Anatomical Head* (2000), *Anemone* from *A Bestiary* (1990), *Banshee Pearls* (1991), *Bat* from *A Bestiary* (1990), *Bestiary, A* (1990), *Bird* (1999), *Bird and Egg* (1996), *Bird Skeleton* (2000), and *Black Flag* (1989).

When draftsmanship enters in, even the most basic images are rendered with appalling crudeness (which is perhaps one reason she is attracted to mechanical reproduction). But to expect otherwise would be presumptuous. It is her campy self-image, her ostentatious use of gender, her family background (she is the daughter of the minimalist sculptor Tony Smith), and not her overwhelming output that keeps Kiki Smith popular with the art establishment. Her work remains hermetically sealed off from the possibility of direct visual experience.

If there is a silver lining in Currin’s example, it is that an interest in visual enjoyment, no matter how imperfect, may be returning to art. Compared to our Stone-age forebears, we’ve come a long way, baby, but not always in the right direction.

2 “Kiki Smith: Prints, Books, and Things” opened at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens, on December 5 and remains on view through March 8, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by The Museum of Modern Art (150 pages, \$45).

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

It's a most wonderful time of the year, the annual concert of the Richard Tucker Music Foundation. This outfit has been going for twenty-eight years, doing operatic good works and staging this gala concert. They help young singers in a variety of ways, and give one big prize each year. The foundation is named, of course, for the late, great American tenor, and it is tended by his family, friends, and admirers. The annual concert features a galaxy of stars—or at least established pros—all singing arias or maybe a duet or ensemble or two. Tucker's son Barry gives a charmingly unpolished speech, and everyone is bathed with good feeling.

The big Tucker winner this year was John Relyea, the Canadian bass-baritone. He is a singer I have praised repeatedly, for he has impressed in opera and oratorio alike. (I have not yet heard him in song.) I recall seeing him in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the Met. This was a production loaded with low-voice luminaries, such as James Morris and René Pape, and Relyea had only the humble part of the Night Watchman. But even in that, he left a mark, with the beauty of his voice, the intelligence of his singing, and his assured presence. More recently, he has appeared at the Met in a big part, Figaro in the Mozart opera, along with Dorothea Röschmann, the German soprano, and a slew of other young or youngish singers. This was one of the most sparkling and satisfying events of the Met season so far, not least because of Relyea.

He made a splendid Figaro: smooth, endearing, and compelling. It does him no harm that he is *matinée-idol* handsome, for this is opera, we're talkin'. (Röschmann, too, is blessed in this department.) Relyea is a clean singer, with dependable intonation and the gift of self-possession. Barring disaster, he will be a fixture in our operatic scene for years to come, and the Tucker Award was well presented—even if one wonders whether such a sure thing actually needed such a boost.

Relyea did not sing at the Tucker concert, for he had a commitment at Covent Garden he would not break. There's a lad! Many other singers were on hand, however, including one who conducted: That was Plácido Domingo, who led a sort of pick-up orchestra heavy with players from the Met. It can't be said that Domingo conducted well. His "Hungarian March" from Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust* was dutiful and dull, leaving Fritz Reiner's reputation unthreatened. But it's good to see the old Spaniard pursuing all his interests, and I will repeat my opinion that he's no worse, and probably better, than Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, the retired baritone god across the pond.

Of the singers who, in fact, sang, I will mention three. The first is the Italian tenor Salvatore Licita, famous for replacing Luciano Pavarotti in a Met *Tosca* at the last minute, and for the immense PR machine that works on his behalf. You would think

that he was the second coming of . . . well, Pavarotti or Domingo. He is not. Really not. At the gala, he sang “Cielo e mar,” and he sang it appallingly. He started soupy, sloppy, and flat. He continued much the same way, and his diction was deplorable. Later, he gave an account of Canio’s aria—you know, “Vesti la giubba,” from *I Pagliacci*—and it was better, but still unimpressive. Even worse, he, or the Sony company, put out a CD of opera arias that is barely competent. But the marketing gods have determined that Licitra is a star, so a star he must be, I suppose. This tells us something about the nature of the music biz—about the extra-musical factors that go into reputation-making.

Speaking of marketing, and, for that matter, the importance of looks in opera: Licitra has slimmed down dramatically from his previously Pavarottian proportions. How this affects his voice, I can’t say—weight loss has affected singers for good or ill, across the generations. But it ought to help with the marketing effort (never mind that Pavarotti did okay—how could he not, given that instrument and that talent?). Another tenor, the Canadian Ben Heppner, has also lost a ton of weight recently, so much that I have referred to him as “half a Heppner.” He is singing perhaps better than he ever has, nearly reborn, for whatever reason.

Our second singer from the gala is Aprile Millo, who wowed the crowd merely by showing up. She is a famous canceller, in a league with the notorious Teresa Stratas. But she was there, and she made an entrance so grand—and so pompous—that there were appreciative chuckles in the audience, in addition to hearty applause. La Millo sang an aria from an operatic rarity, *Cecilia*, by Licinio Refice, written in 1923. She’s still got it, that dark, gorgeous sound, a sound that doesn’t come to just any throat. She sang in an old-fashioned, super-veristic manner that has all but disappeared. When she was through with this aria, she asked the audience to be silent, and then she spoke: She really wasn’t feeling well, and would withdraw from the rest of the evening (but

of course). In truth, she should never have come to the hall in the first place. But she wanted to sing at least something, because “I get to see you so seldom now.” Was that a shot at the Met for not engaging her? If so, what chances should a company take on a major-league canceller?

Millo was also true to form some weeks later, at the memorial service/concert for Harold C. Schonberg, held in Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall: She didn’t show up at all. Schonberg, the illustrious music critic of *The New York Times*, died in July, and this was a lovely tribute, during which several of his friends spoke and performed. One of them was Earl Wild, the grand old pianist, who played a Liszt ballade with the expected Wildean mastery. You might say, however, that Aprile Millo did her part by sending her regrets—just as she’s supposed to.

My third Tucker singer is Stephanie Blythe, the marvelous American mezzo with the huge, huge voice—a voice so large, you can scarcely believe that it’s coming from one person. I have noted before that she is Horne-like, Marilyn Horne-like, and she was perhaps never more so than in singing the duet from *L’Italiana in Algeri*, with Kim Josephson (a capable baritone). This is one of Horne’s great roles—Isabella—and Blythe not only sounded quite a bit like her, but her hand gestures, consciously or not, were also like hers. By the way, I sound as though I’m leveling some sort of accusation. Far from it: The more Horne-likeness—from mezzos or others—the better.

Interesting at the New York Philharmonic were the appearances of two conductors and two pianists. David Robertson and Pierre-Laurent Aimard were paired together, which was useful: They are two of the most ballyhooed musicians in the New York press. Really, if they were as good as their clips, they would be carved in some musical Mt. Rushmore already. Robertson is certainly a competent conductor: but he is perhaps given extra points for being young (by maestro standards) and American. Among some critics and advocates, age and

nationality are vital criteria. Aimard is a French pianist, and he earns points for being a champion of contemporary music. Indeed, he was for years associated with Pierre Boulez's Ensemble Intercontemporain in Paris. In the eyes of many, that is next to godliness.

I do not mean to say that these are not worthy musicians, because they are. But the claims made for them are extravagant. I might mention, in addition, that each has a connection to Lyons: Aimard was born there, and Robertson serves as music director there (although his champions are scandalized that he does not yet have a major American podium—he will). For that matter, I should have noted that Robertson was for years music director of that same Ensemble Intercontemporain. Young, American (Californian, no less), the Ensemble Intercontemporain—what more could you want?

The Robertson/Aimard program with the Philharmonic consisted in its first half of two pieces for piano and orchestra, not one. This gave Aimard plenty of opportunity to show what he can do. The first piece was Debussy's *Fantaisie*, which had me nervous, because I remembered a Ravel G-major concerto, played by Aimard, that was astoundingly bad—amateurish, really. But he handled the Debussy well. He was nimble and sensitive, and revealed a good sense of the shape of the piece (which can come off rather shapeless). Curiously, he played very quietly, causing one to strain to hear at times. The piano seemed to be another instrument in the orchestra, rather than the featured thing—but that was no disgrace, not in Debussy. In spots, I would have asked for more singing out, less reticence. But, to his credit, Aimard forced nothing, sticking to his relatively modest course.

David Robertson, in this piece, was blunt and straightforward; he allowed for little mystery or sinuousness. In the slow movement, he was overly panting in his risings and fallings, his sudden crescendos and decrescendos—Debussy would have benefited from a subtler touch. And in the last move-

ment, you might have wished for more quivering intensity, a greater sense of aliveness and wonder. Moreover, unseemly blasts from the orchestra are no substitute for a genuinely climactic finale. Still, Robertson had done adequately, and so had Aimard. (Actually, the pianist had done better than that.)

Disappointing, however, was the next work, Prokofiev's Concerto No. 1, that beloved, rambunctious opus. It has a heart-pounding beginning, but Aimard didn't play it that way: He was short on visceral excitement. In fact, the entire first movement sounded somewhat plodding and routine, rather than propulsive and headlong. Also, the return of the opening theme at the end of the movement would have been much more effective if piano and orchestra had been together. But Aimard showed a lot of technique, including the tightness—a musical tightness, mind you—that is necessary for Prokofiev. In the final movement, Aimard was decent, but he could have used more crispness and snap, to give this music the jagged thrill it should contain.

As in the Debussy, Robertson led the orchestra ably, but a sense of the pedestrian predominated. Electricity was missing. Toward the end of the work, the conductor did some attractive moving around on the podium, but this is no guarantee of eliciting power from the orchestra.

The purely orchestral portion of the concert was devoted to Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a fine test of a conductor (and of an orchestra, for that matter). Robertson delivered a fairly correct and uncomplicated reading, and he should be applauded for not trying to make the work too philosophical. You might have faulted him for not being especially deep or probing, but at least he wasn't lost in the clouds. Each section of the work had its essential mood, and Robertson had adequate control over the orchestra—but, in the final pages, I was longing for an accurate entrance. Just one. A conductor, no matter

how golden, should take care of the details, even if the details seem trivial.

I have often said about hackneyed music, "It's not *its* fault that it's hackneyed." I might say of overhyped musicians, "It's not *their* fault they're overhyped." True. This conductor and this pianist have built solid careers for themselves, and they will likely continue to grow. But I, for one, am blind (or deaf) to the greatness that others enthusiastically perceive in them.

Less celebrated—at least in this town—are the conductor Marcello Viotti and the pianist Stephen Hough. Their Philharmonic concert was immensely pleasurable. Viotti was actually doing double duty in New York, guesting with the Philharmonic, and also at the Met, where he conducted *La Juive*, the opera by Halévy. An Italian born in French Switzerland, Viotti is very busy in Europe, but not so well known here. Stephen Hough is an Englishman who has had a rewarding, if not supersonic, career all over.

Their program was boldly old-fashioned, beginning with Ibert's *Escales*, that coloristic work depicting exotic ports of call. Viotti handled the orchestra with considerable finesse. He is obviously a man of learning, discipline, and musicality. Even more impressive was Hough, in Saint-Saëns's Concerto No. 5, nicknamed the "Egyptian" (because it was completed in Cairo). This piece is tailor-made for Hough, who is an unabashed virtuoso, possessing a big technique and a Romantic heart. I should say, however, that his playing in Saint-Saëns's first movement was both Classical and Romantic, reflecting the composer himself. The slow movement was achingly beautiful—sort of breath-catching. And the final movement was jazzy, infectious, and ultimately gripping.

At the memorial service/concert for Harold Schonberg, Earl Wild was described as "the last Romantic." He often is. So was Horowitz (who indeed had an album entitled *The Last Romantic*). We are always having last Romantics, but they keep com-

ing. Hough is one. So is Arcadi Volodos, the young Russian. So, in a way, is Garrick Ohlsson, the American, who, incidentally, played a fine recital in Avery Fisher Hall. His program included a Handel suite and a Haydn sonata, the former of which he played exquisitely, the latter of which he played less admirably. But his second half was all Scriabin, and here he was almost ludicrously commanding. In the most difficult works, he is at ease, playing with the music like a kitten with a ball of string.

No, we will always have Romantics. And while I'm digressing on pianists, let me say a brief word about Menahem Pressler, and Schubert. In last month's chronicle, I reported that New York had seen three performances of the Schubert B-flat sonata, D. 960, from three major pianists, in the space of a few weeks. Well, add a fourth to the list: Pressler played the sonata at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Very few works could bear all this exposure; the Schubert is no average piece.

But back to the Philharmonic concert at hand. After intermission, Marcello Viotti conducted two of Respighi's Roman tone poems, *Fountains* and *Pines*. He traversed these works with sure authority, making himself felt, but letting the musicians have their head, when appropriate. The pictures behind each of the works were vivid, and the Philharmonic players seemed to revel in what they were doing. For my taste, the swelling final section of *Pines* was a little fast—it has even greater power when more measured. But it was majestic enough, and Viotti merited his ovation. This was one of those concerts that remind you why you loved music in the first place. You know?

We will close with a little Christmas. On a Sunday afternoon, the soprano Deborah Voigt appeared with the Philharmonic for a holiday concert. She had been singing at the Met in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, and the night I heard her she was in uncharacteristically poor form—odds are, she was sick. She sounded much better in this Christmas sing, giving of her big voice and big personality.

Possibly the highlight of the concert was her opening, Handel's "Rejoice, greatly," from *Messiah*. It was a treat to hear this aria sung richly—even opulently—instead of hootily or chirpily. Exactly when were Voigt-like voices (not that there are many) ruled out of Handel? The soprano herself remarked, after she finished the piece, "Didn't expect to hear *that* from a Wagnerian, huh?"

Later that day came one of the pleasantest events on the musical calendar: the Chanticleer Christmas concert, in the Medieval Sculpture Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, right in front of the huge Christmas tree with its Baroque Neapolitan crèche. Chanticleer, of course, is the twelve-member a cappella singing group from San Francisco. They sang a program crossing seven centuries, from Gregorian chant to now. As usual, they sang in pure, clear tones, beautifully coordinating with one another. This group is so well coordinated, they even open their books together. There was an imperfect entrance or two (vocally speaking), but otherwise they were like a Swiss clock.

Chanticleer frequently sings its audience into a trance. After one shrewdly calibrated, hushed piece, the friend sitting next to me said, "You almost hate to clap." It's true. The question occurred to me, Is it the setting, and the special nature of this season, or is it really the excellence of the group? It is the latter, I would say. They are a highly disciplined outfit, striving for and meeting high standards. Even when they let their hair down—when they swing—they remember their musicianship, and adhere to those standards.

One slight complaint I have about these Christmas programs is that they tend to be on the somber side. That is, they tend to favor the somber Christmas repertory. After one more dirge-like piece, I thought, "Come on, this is not a grim holiday!" Even "Un flambeau, Jeanette, Isabelle!" was more lulling than gay. But the group usually manages to catch a spark, just in time. They ended their printed program with a joyous medley of spirituals, arranged by their

music director, Joseph Jennings, and sang one encore, the Biebl *Ave Maria*, which is rather a signature piece of theirs. They were just this side of precious here—and a little slow—but they still own the piece, no doubt.

For several years, I thought of Chanticleer as a guilty pleasure of mine. But now the guilt is entirely gone, and they are, frankly, one of the most satisfying ensembles I know, instrumental or vocal. In the age of the cheap Christmastime, they give you a substantial concert—one that sticks to you, instead of fading into nothingness.

Concert notes

La Juive by the Vienna State Opera,
Metropolitan Opera House, New York

Exemplified by the operas of Giacomo Meyerbeer, French Grand Opera was among the dominant styles of the early nineteenth century. With the exception of Verdi's *Don Carlos*, however, the whole genre of Grand Opera has been out of favor since the beginning of the twentieth century. Productions of Grand Opera have been rare, and the few that have been staged have done little to revive the genre's reputation. A few years ago, for example, the Metropolitan Opera attempted a production of Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, but John Dexter's restricted presentation doomed it.

This season the Met has imported from the Vienna State Opera a production of Fromental Halévy's *La Juive*, one of the most famous examples of the form, which I heard on November 6. Although this too is far more austere presented than what Grand Opera calls for, this *Juive* finds a measure of success, owing to the singing and the subject matter. As with all French examples of Grand Opera, however, the production can do little to overcome the innate weakness of the music. Halévy was an even less gifted composer than Meyerbeer, and the hours of his threadbare opera

stretch long, despite the cuts the management has made in the work.

The tale is the product of Eugène Scribe, an assiduous workman who did much to define the form. As with most Grand Opera, the plot of *La Juive* is overtly sensationalist, revolving around love, hatred, and death, and delivering a Big Revelation at final curtain-fall. We are in Constance in 1414, celebrating the Catholic victory over the Hussites at a large church convocation. The Jewish jeweler Eléazar, who hates all Christians and is hated by them, is the protective father of Rachel. Despite her father's vigilance, Rachel falls in love with Léopold, the general who has defeated the Hussites. Unknown to Rachel, Léopold is married (in this production, with children) to Princesse Eudoxie, a niece of the Emperor. Meanwhile, Cardinal Brogny secretly searches for his long-lost daughter, the fate of whom is known only to Eléazar. Brogny's desperate desire to find his daughter is satisfied only at the end of the opera when Eléazar reveals that Rachel, who is to be executed for loving a Christian, is in fact Brogny's child (a shiksa, not a Jewess!), upon which revelation Eléazar goes to his own death.

Richard Wagner warned that French Grand Opera was a series of effects without causes, and the Met production (Günter Krämer, director; Gottfried Pilz, designer) attempts to address this deficiency by staging *La Juive* in a vaguely modern setting, so suggesting parallels between the persecution of the opera's Jewish characters and that of European Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. We are no longer in historical Constance in 1414, but in an anonymous middle-European Dürrenmatt-land where color is restricted to two shades: the jolly burghers wear black-and-white lederhosen and wave little black-and-white flags. The unit set sports a large ramp on which the mighty play, while the Jews are consigned to the dark spaces underneath. The duet between Eléazar and Eudoxie (she is buying a magnificent jeweled necklace for Léopold)

is awkwardly staged on two levels—nonsense, literally, but meant lumberingly to emphasize the separation of Christian and Jew. Indeed, the Jews are always held separate (in the first act by a glass wall) and apart. Although the contemporary costuming and the extrapolation of the concept wears in the usual, dogged Germanic way, the single-mindedness of the production team does unify this sprawling opera, as does the elimination of such frivolities as the ballet and Eudoxie's charming but lightweight Bolero aria.

Would that the music were stronger! There is, famously, Eléazar's "Rachel, quand du Seigneur" (words written by Adolphe Nourrit, who originated the role), remembered mainly from Caruso's recording; there is a lovely Passover seder, which, though sugared, is nonetheless the most felt music in the score; and a couple of fine arias and some grandly rousing choral climaxes, but on the whole it's very thin. It is thinnest for the most crucial scene of the opera: the confrontation between Brogny and Eléazar in Act IV. What should be a central clash of wills on one level and an exercise in parental devotion on another devolves in fits and starts that never build into anything dramatic or musical. Even Meyerbeer, who was admittedly no Verdi, could manage more emotive power.

What rescued the evening was the singing and the conducting. Soile Isokoski has a lovely, full soprano, good in the lower range, and one could not imagine a more poignant vocal and histrionic performance. Although dressed as a frump, she lit the stage. Elizabeth Futral is one of today's finest light coloratura sopranos, and she showed her brilliance in the music she was given to sing. Ferruccio Furlanetto may be too loud and too domineering, but his well-burnished bass is correct for Brogny, and he brings weight to the big choral scenes. Only Eric Cutler, as Léopold, pushed his voice beyond what it could do, and even he improved as the evening went on.

Decidedly, however, the show was carried by Neil Shicoff as Eléazar. He obviously

believes in this character, and every movement he made onstage was invested with the melancholy of a Jew in an unaccepting world. The whole was forcefully sung—though the voice is well past its prime—and one could forgive his overemotional reading of the big aria for the ovation it had to receive. Marcello Viotti's pacing of the uneven work was first-rate, in that it minimized as much as possible its faults while highlighting its strengths—no mean feat of prestidigitation. One would like to hear him in an opera of more graceful music-making.

—Patrick J. Smith

Pelléas et Mélisande by the Boston Symphony, Carnegie Hall, New York

Concert performances of opera combine advantages with disadvantages. The advantage of hearing Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in concert, for example, as performed by the Boston Symphony (Carnegie Hall, October 20), is that of enjoying the colors of Debussy's orchestral palette under the sympathetic baton of Bernard Haitink. The disadvantage—important in this work—is the lack of the visual elements of light and darkness that are so vital to this story of young love and death in the Kingdom of Allemonde.

Bernard Haitink, as conductor, has never been especially popular in this country (his Met career is spotty and patchy), probably because his strength lies in understatement and a pointed polish of style over impetuosity—not a recipe for success over here. But Debussy's music, with its shadows and subtleties, matches Haitink's strengths, and his sure grasp of the overall shape of the five-act opera, leading to the climax of the

scene between Pelléas and Mélisande and the sublime dying fall of the heroine in the fifth act, only added to the enjoyment of the evening.

The cast was—with one exception—approaching ideal. Gerald Finley, in the very grateful role of Golaud, projected that combination of blind anguish and sudden rage that makes up his tortured soul—Debussy's Wotan! His crystal enunciation of the French text brought Maeterlinck's words clearly to the fore and served to anchor solidly the story that can too easily dissolve into the mists of the unknowing and the unknowable. Simon Keenlyside's high baritone gave weight to his Pelléas—at its strongest in his final scene, where the repressed longing for Mélisande finally bursts its boundaries and cascades into passion.

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson is a treasured artist and a cult figure to music lovers for her plangent and highly evocative mezzo voice, at once rich and deeply moving. She reined it in for much of the evening, which was correct for a portrayal of the naïve and elfin Mélisande, and as always gave a touching performance, but even so it was a shade too knowing and mature, as well as being too sensual and corporeal for the role. Nathalie Stutzmann's true contralto voice (a rarity today) was perfect for the mother Genevieve, and the boy soprano James Danner gave a properly affecting Yniold.

The one drawback lay in John Tomlinson's loud and wobble-voiced Arkel, less a compassionate presence onstage than a grating (and boring) intrusion, contriving to roil the last act with his singing but finally not being able to destroy a magisterial account of a very great opera.

—Patrick J. Smith

The media

The Mountains of Instead

by James Bowman

It takes but a slight acquaintance with the newspaper business to see that the large corporations which run America's newspapers are worried sick about the demographic profile of their product. The average age of newspaper readers in this country is somewhere in the mid-fifties, and the paucity of more youthful readers has led a number of the established companies, including the owners of *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, and *The Dallas Morning News*, recently to set up separate, youth-oriented papers to compete with the parent product in the same market. This they do by offering the much abbreviated news-sheet approach that busy, non-reading young people with many electronic sources of news available to them are supposed to favor. The Dallas project, called *Quick*, was rushed into production ahead of schedule in November because of a rival start-up called *A.M. Journal Express*.

At the time Eric Celeste, a writer for an alternative newspaper called *The Dallas Observer*, wrote what I took to be a not entirely facetious article pointing to a potentially fatal lacuna in the kiddie papers being produced by established newspaper companies. "If you want your newspaper to appeal to young people," he advised his own paper's new competitors, "you must be willing to print the word—" but then you know what the word is, don't you? It's the same word that writers used first to shock, in the days of Joyce and D. H. Lawrence,

and then, since Norman Mailer misspelled it in *The Naked and the Dead*, as a kind of signifier of authenticity. Amazingly, after more than half a century, this is how Mr. Celeste still sees it. "Smartly written publications must be willing to offend those of average or below-average intelligence, and newspapers will never do that."

Perhaps anticipating the objection that it takes no very elevated IQ to use this word, Mr. Celeste attempts to explain himself. It seems that it is not so much intelligence that he means as reticence or a sense of decorum. Here I am forced to paraphrase, as Mr. Celeste himself hasn't the wit to make his own argument. But I infer that he thinks such a sense of decorum is a species of dishonesty, and that any life which includes sexual activity must therefore include verbal allusion to same, and that in the most vulgar and obscene terms, or risk incurring a charge of hypocrisy. "Young people want the world as they see it: without filters," he writes. Because they use this word in conversation and because they do the thing which it describes when it is not functioning as a mere expletive, they want the word in their newspapers too. "That's their world, and if you wanna live in it, you'd better print it."

As an explanation of the peculiar functioning of this linguistic register—a long-standing taboo whose violation is by now also long-standing yet still seems a violation—this leaves something to be desired,

but about the basic point Mr. Celeste may well be right. At any rate, John Kerry, the junior senator from Massachusetts seems to think so, because he used the word in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, another paper said to appeal to the young, in what could only have been a desperate attempt to administer CPR to his flagging presidential campaign. When asked by the magazine's interviewer, Will Dana, "Did you feel you were blindsided by [Howard] Dean's success?" Kerry replied, and again I paraphrase, that he had, in voting for the war himself, expected Dean to oppose it programmatically but that he had not expected George Bush to make of the war a— and here he used a familiar compound construction of the offensive word with "up," which could, interestingly enough, also have described the state of his own campaign.

Hilariously, the White House Chief of Staff, Mr. Andrew Card, demanded on behalf of President Bush and the American people an apology for Kerry's offense to those, presumably of advanced age and/or average or below average intelligence, who might disapprove of such language in a prospective president, and was met with this stinging reply by a Kerry spokesman, Stephanie Cutter: "John Kerry saw combat up close, and he doesn't mince words when it comes to politicians who put ideological recklessness ahead of American troops. . . . I think the American people would rather Card and the rest of the White House staff spend more time on fixing Bush's flawed policy in Iraq than on Sen. Kerry's language." By this time, the story was vying with that of the President and the Thanksgiving turkey-cum-centerpiece in Baghdad as the dumbest story of the year and the *reductio ad maximum absurdum* of the media scandal-culture.

Yet it masked an instructive example of the way in which that culture is coming more and more to function. For the assumption behind Kerry's accusation—that the war had been reduced by the President's conduct of it to the shambolic condition of the Kerry-

for-President juggernaut—was that the standard by which success and failure are measured in politics is now entirely subjective and so virtually identical with that of the all-knowing punditocracy. The pundits have never been shy about announcing the success or failure of measures on the day they are introduced and on no better grounds than their own say-so. If you knew only what you read in Paul Krugman's column in *The New York Times*, for instance, you would wonder every day that *anything* continues to function in America, so comprehensive is the failure of the Bush administration in the portrait he paints of it. Does even the opposition take this stuff seriously? Even the most rabid Bush-hater must be aware at some level that he would have to be supposed to get *something* right, if only by chance.

But Kerry's announcement of failure in Iraq is by way of becoming a commonplace on the left—and so, of course, it no longer needs to be justified. Not long before, *The New York Times* had editorialized that "the failure of American policy in Iraq"—also, by the way, in Afghanistan—"in recent months has been painfully visible." Really? How so? The writer does not of course say, but he appears to mean nothing more than that there are still attacks on American troops there. If your definition of success is nothing short of a complete cessation of violence, who can ever succeed? Here the *Times* thinks it not worth even making a pretense of giving credit to the American administration in Iraq—or in Washington—for its attempts to impose civil order in the country. Anything less than perfect security is no security, ergo "failure." As with Kerry's comment, the only acceptable standard appears to be a hypothetical perfection which is assumed, absent any compelling reason to suppose that the pundit (or rival politician) could not himself have achieved it, to be the norm.

In the same spirit, General Wesley Clark claims that "despite the worldwide outpouring of sympathy for the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, we squandered the

chance to create a strong international coalition that could address the problems of terrorism beyond the limits of sheer U.S. military power, and also help to share some of the enormous political, diplomatic and economic burdens that the struggle would entail." And just how did we "squander" this chance? At what point did the "out-pouring of sympathy" translate itself into military and diplomatic promissory notes which we then failed to redeem? At no point, actually. Clark, like Kerry, merely takes the out-of-power politician's license to assume that if he had been in power things would have been, well, different. This is made easier for him by his contention that the war in Iraq was a "distraction" from the war against al-Qaeda and therefore that the alternative to conquering Saddam Hussein was conquering al-Qaeda—surely a worthy goal but one no closer to being achieved for not accomplishing the other.

But perhaps, just as Richard Nixon claimed to have a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam in 1968, Clark has a secret plan for winning the war on terrorism? I hope so, for what his public plan consists of is nothing but the panacea prescribed by the anti-Bush coalition for everything: increased international cooperation. In Afghanistan, Clark writes, "the United States was left wrestling with a hundred governments bilaterally—an enormously difficult endeavor in something so complicated and sensitive as the war on terror. So what sounded easy at the top—a 'floating coalition'—proved far more difficult to enact at the bottom of the government, where much of the heavy burden was being undertaken. Consequently, despite the thousands of al-Qaeda suspects detained worldwide, the network was (and remains) far from broken." As non sequiturs go, that is a real doozy, implying that greater international cooperation between national police forces would have seen off al-Qaeda by now when, as—for once it is true to say—everybody knows, the problem isn't the suspects we have identified or caught but the ones we haven't.

This kind of intellectual sleight-of-hand is typical of Clark's book, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism and the American Empire*—whose title implies that it offers something like a blueprint for fighting a war against terrorists. Anyone attempting to use it in this way, however, would find it worryingly short on the specifics, even of what he would have done had he been in Bush's place. "The way to beat terrorists," writes Clark, "was to take away their popular support. Target their leaders individually, demonstrate their powerlessness, roll up the organizations from the bottom. I thought it would be better to drive them back into one or two states that had given them support, and then focus our efforts there." Sounds great, doesn't it? Simple too! A thousand pities that our moron president didn't think up such a killer plan for himself, or at least put Clark in charge. Because, see, that way we wouldn't have any of these problems we're having in Iraq today.

The willingness of people to believe such arrant nonsense is obviously not unrelated to their political predilections—which, in the media as in the Democratic party—are all anti-Bush. But there is another reason why the media and, increasingly, politicians too are so ready to measure every reality against a fantastical standard of perfection. It is that, that way, everything that happens which is not entirely wonderful can be presented as a scandal. This occurred to me recently when I saw the headline to a *Washington Post* story by Peter Behr that read: "Probers Say Blackout in August Was Avoidable." Do they indeed? said I to the phantom headline writer, I think not aloud. You astonish me. What an extraordinary thing! Who would ever have guessed, without the investigations of the "probers" to guide us, that the system which broke down might *not* have broken down—at least not if we had known that it was going to break down, and when it was going to break down, and taken precautionary measures to prevent it from breaking down?

Nincompoop! *Every* misfortune is avoid-

able if you know of it in advance and have the means to prevent it and can apply them specifically. The only problem is that you never *do* know in advance, and so your measures must always be general and not specific ones. Who had decided that this was news, or that these “probers”—a “three-month task force investigation” by the Department of Energy and the Canadian Ministry of same—were needed to tell us of it? Last year, another task force, headed by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman of the Council on Foreign Relations, was insisting that the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, were also avoidable. At the time it was accepting the congratulations of the media for having “predicted” seven months before the event that America would be attacked somewhere, some time soon, by somebody (see “Shooting for Literary Immortality” in the December 2002 *New Criterion*). A congressional report on the attacks by a joint committee of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees issued last July came to a similar conclusion, faulting the relevant security agencies on the grounds that, well, they should have known.

To be fair, both reports identify a number of reasonable and general measures which were not taken and which would have made a difference had they been taken. In the case of the blackout, the “probers” found that the control room operators of the First-Energy Corporation of Akron, Ohio were not properly trained, while trees which it was the responsibility of others of the corporation’s employees to trim were not trimmed as, according to normal prophylactic practices, they ought to have been. But it was obvious that the purpose of the reports, like that of all similar exercises, was less to apportion blame than to deflect it. Even if the blackout had been entirely, as it certainly was partly, a matter of bad luck, some task force or another would have had to be commissioned to come up with a series of recommendations for action, even pointless action, lest those in a position to gain some political advantage from the mis-

fortune should be able to accuse those in authority of “doing nothing.”

Accordingly, the report produced a programmatic response from the Energy Secretary, Spencer Abraham, who pretended to a degree of indignation on behalf of the fact that power companies have hitherto been left to regulate themselves in these matters, presumably on the not unreasonable assumption that it is bad for them as well as for their customers when the power goes out. *Nous avons changé tout cela*, says the Secretary, his list of recommendations for action firmly in his hand. “There need to be consequences that are well known and enforceable,” for any future such instances of presumptive negligence, he said. “Very serious consequences.” Clearly, he was not thinking of such consequences as the power company’s going out of business, or its management’s being replaced by its board of directors. Equally clearly, he has absorbed the bureaucratic principle that there must always be someone to blame—someone “accountable,” to use the jargon of the trade, within a hierarchy of authority.

The *Post*’s headline was therefore merely a reminder of how quickly the passion for accountability can become a presumptive need to turn every conceivable contingency to political advantage—or to prevent the other side from doing so—particularly where, as in the case of September 11 or the blackout, popular passions have been aroused. Every misfortune thus becomes a temptation that is all-but-irresistible to opposition candidates for public office, and especially candidates for president, among whom General Clark has I think become the first directly to blame the Bush administration—as opposed to a more decorous hinting at blame—for the deaths at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Others can hardly be far behind him, though the rest of us might do well to remember in the midst of their enthusiasm for identifying the guilty parties that some share of guilt for the 3000 American dead ought to be apportioned to the hijackers themselves.

Whether you are selling newspapers to

adults or to children, the demand for stories—at least for the stories that you think are good ones—is quite likely to exceed the supply without some such effort to manufacture scandal, to make non-stories into stories in order to win and keep readers or viewers. That’s why we’ve become accustomed, almost without realizing it, to seeing less reporting of what happened and more imagining what might have happened in some set of ideal circumstances which can plausibly be made a reproach to those who have had imperfectly to deal with real circumstances. On the same front page with its report on the blackout task force, *The Washington Post* took another plunge into hypothetical waters with a story by Peter Slevin headed: “Wrong Turn at a Postwar Crossroads,” which speculated that the decision by America’s proconsul in Baghdad to disband the Iraqi army was a terrible blunder. “‘This was a mistake, to dissolve the army and the police,’ said Ayad Alawi, head of the security committee of the Iraqi Governing Council. ‘We absolutely not only lost time. The vacuum allowed our enemies to regroup and to infiltrate the country.’”

General Anthony Zinni, U.S.M.C. (ret.), described as “a vocal opponent of the war,” agrees, according to Slevin, calling the decision to disband the “worst mistake”—presumably among many lesser mistakes—of the Bush administration since the war. To be sure, Slevin allows, “supporters of the decision counter that the army posed a potential threat to a fledgling Iraqi governing authority and U.S. forces—and that it was so second-rate and so infiltrated with Baath Party figures that it could not be salvaged,” but the evidence for the “mistake” hypothesis lay only in the outcome of the decision. “Now, the Americans are trying to recover—including rehiring some of the same soldiers they demobilized—at what one top Defense Department official called ‘warp speed.’ And while the administration’s handling of the Iraqi army has been widely viewed as a fundamental decision of the occupation, a number of U.S. officials and

analysts”—all of them, of course, anonymous—“are saying it was fundamentally wrong.”

Their view is summed up in the words of “a former intelligence officer who recently returned from Iraq” and who, says Slevin, “said more could have been done.” Once again, one has that talking-to-the-newspaper moment. When can it *not* be said that “more could have been done”? The question is *what* should have been done, and the answer to it is often no more knowable in retrospect than it was in advance. The article itself acknowledges the school of thought which holds that, in effect, less should have been done. Who knows which is right? And when, at length, we think we do know, it is only by refusing to speculate further on the range of outcomes—the better or the worse—which could have come from the decision not taken. “Clear, unscaleable ahead/ Rise the Mountains of Instead,” wrote W. H. Auden, “From whose cold, cascading streams/ None may drink except in dreams.”

What strikes me is not so much that politicians and media people should delight in inhabiting this dream-world when it suits their political purposes as that there are so few voices raised to remind us that it *is* a dream-world, and that it is illegitimate to pretend that the results of all political decisions could have been, and should have been, foreseen. Even easily foreseen. Where this is in fact the case, the decisions are all easy ones—which no one would presumably say of the decision as to what to do about the Iraqi army. It is fair enough in politics for those who make bad decisions to be made to pay a political price for them, even though they could not have known any better, but it smacks of the insufferably self-righteous for those who are in a position to make them pay the price to keep insisting that they *should* have known better, as they themselves would have done in their place. I wonder if it is this prevailing spirit of priggishness which is really turning the youngsters off the mainstream media.

The achievement of Robert Lowell

by Richard Tillinghast

Robert Lowell was notably unlucky in Ian Hamilton's major biography written on him in 1983. Hamilton's biography, while impressively comprehensive, presented a damagingly wrong-headed and skewed picture of Lowell the man. The reading public on the whole has accepted Hamilton's portrait of Lowell as authentic, as they did in the case of another damaging biography of a poet, Lawrance Thompson's three-volume book on Robert Frost. As if by compensation, Lowell is posthumously blessed in the new *Collected Poems* edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter.¹ Any "collected works" is a tombstone. (And I say that as someone who likes tombstones.) At almost 1200 pages, this is a big marble slab of a book. Himself a poet of great force and originality, Frank Bidart studied with Lowell as a graduate student at Harvard in the 1960s and became a close friend, literary amanuensis, and collaborator. That he has chosen to devote so many years to this project is a tribute both to Lowell and to Bidart's own scrupulousness, attention to detail, and love for Lowell as poet and man. Bidart has achieved cult status within the world of poetry—a world that can be seen as both elite and disregarded—as someone who has worked selflessly on his friends' poems. The list of those whom he has

helped bring poems and manuscripts to their potential would be a very distinguished list indeed. He learned this knack from Lowell, who was an indefatigable reviser of poetry—others' as much as his own. "You didn't write, you *rewrote*," Lowell has Randall Jarrell say to him in a poem where his dead friend appears in a dream. This quality made Lowell a great teacher for those who studied with him, because he taught us, as he said about Allen Tate, that "a poem must be tinkered with and recast until one's eyes pop out of one's head." Lowell in his madness would identify with others—*become* others in his own mind—particularly great poets from the past. There is an ancient rumor that while staying at McLean's private mental hospital near Boston, he significantly revised the Norton Anthology of Poetry in the library there.

Because Lowell was mad, by anyone's standards. Philip Larkin, whom he visited in Hull, is said to have described him to a friend as "barking mad." Though it's been familiar for years, I don't think I had ever looked closely at the early photo Alfred Eisenstadt took of Lowell before seeing it reproduced on the jacket of the *Collected Poems*. While Eisenstadt captured Lowell looking almost dauntingly respectable, his hair freshly cut, his horn-rimmed glasses, necktie, and sleeveless sweater impeccable, the poet leans at an angle, his off-vertical pose paralleled by toppled books on the

¹ *Collected Poems* by Robert Lowell, edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1186 pages, \$45.

In the blur of my glasses, you cannot fade—
your ruffle, electricity and your sure tongue . . .
richer now and much more radical.
The sun lights your windows it will never
crash,
this blind snow, this blind light everywhere,
the sad, metallic sunlight of New York
throwing light on something about to die.
This light was familiar in the older cities;
it goes, disclosing less than leaves of
artichokes—
a light that blinded kings who fled to London,
where Dickens might have played Napoleon's
Nephew
cloaked in cigar smoke and the moans of girls,
a smell of chestnuts like a humidior . . .
watching exile chew his face from the mirror.

I have many doubts about the unrhymed fourteen-line poems that make up the bulk of his writing from the late sixties through 1973. The traditional sonnet derives its identity from its complex framework of rhymes, as well as its division into octave and sestet, both of which Lowell on the whole abrogated. Look again, though, at the last six lines. This poem really does have a sestet, and it suggests a radical re-definition of the traditional sonnet's sestet. To put the matter crudely, line nine is where the poem starts to get strange. Up to this point the language is reminiscent of earlier Lowell, the Lowell of *For the Union Dead* (1964)

specifically. And then the artichokes appear out of context, so different in tone from the high, elegiac feeling of the first eight lines. The artichokes are effective as a breach of poetic decorum, an example in miniature of the kind of shock that was a significant aspect of Lowell's genius, part and parcel of the enormous contribution he made to the art. Whoever the "you" in the poem is—I would think of her as Lowell's second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, almost an emblem of New York in his eyes—she is long gone from the poem by now, as the poem invokes history, with the "kings who fled to London."

By the time he left Hardwick and New York for his third wife, Caroline Blackwood, Lowell was “king” of American poetry; London was a city both of refuge and of exile for him. At the same time he worried, rightly, that by leaving New York, in the eyes of the American literary scene he had stepped offstage. This personal dimension informs the last line: Lowell’s sense that he was disappearing, even from his own examining gaze. “La Lumière” by no means ranks among his more significant political or historical poems; still it illustrates how he uncannily, almost by instinct, brought together the personal and the political. Even the ruffle in line two has an odd little associational flicker to it, hinting at, let’s say, Queen Elizabeth I.

My use of the word “flicker” is deliberate, because much of the pleasure one gets from reading the “sonnets” comes from such subtleties. The three lines beginning “where Dickens might have played Napoleon’s Nephew,” however, are an example of how these poems often run off the rails. Not accidentally, however. This sestet is a place where sight is transformed into imagination. How many readers, however, might wish or even be able to entertain such thoughts as Dickens playing Napoleon III? Or a contemplation of “cigar smoke and the moans of girls”? The third of the three lines also seems a misdirection, at least to me. Advocates of these poems would champion

them as vanguardist forays into the area where language and the imagination meet. As such, *History* and the other volumes associated with it anticipate postmodernism and Language Poetry.

The publication of these collected poems presents the occasion for an evaluation of Lowell's entire career, which the jacket copy rightly calls "one of the great careers in twentieth-century poetry." The trajectory is clear enough, within the limits of what for a writer was a relatively short life—and you can get the broad outline of it from a chronology printed in the back of the book along with a glossary and 150 pages of notes, many of them very helpful. Lowell quit Harvard, the logical educational choice for a young man of his Boston Brahmin background, to become a student of John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College. He began publishing dense, difficult, allusive, muscular poems in the forties. His model for an iambic pentameter line that strained against its limitations and spilled over into powerful enjambments was Milton—a surprising poetic model in the New Critical climate of the time, since T. S. Eliot, whose word was law, had taken pains to exclude the author of *Paradise Lost* from his pantheon of English-language poets. Lowell's first major book, *Lord Weary's Castle*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1946. The next year he was awarded a Guggenheim, and the year after that he was made Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (now called Poet Laureate). On the strength of one book, Lowell came to be widely regarded as the leading poet of his generation.

His readers and critics would have been delighted had he kept on writing poems like those in *Lord Weary's Castle*. But on the heels of his early success, he immediately became restless in a way that would characterize his entire life as a writer. Following his friend Randall Jarrell's suggestion that he should try to bring more people into his poems to counter a certain centripetal focus in his work, he wrote an elaborate and intense family melodrama called *The Mills of*

the Kavanaghs, which was not nearly so well received as *Lord Weary's Castle* had been. Jarrell wrote that the poem's central figure, Anne Kavanaugh, sounded like Robert Lowell would have sounded like if he had been a girl. Though it contains several dramatic monologues, such as "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid" and "Thanksgiving's Over," that rank with some of Lowell's best poems, this book is transitional. Though its elaborate metrical style and use of rhyme are typical of his early work, the interest in madness and extreme states of consciousness, as well as the attempt to include other voices and reach out more to the world around him, can be seen as leading toward his major work, *Life Studies* (1959).

His mentor and old friend Allen Tate tried to convince Lowell not to publish the book at all—a reaction that is indicative of how radical and innovative a book it turned out to be. Tate, adhering to the doctrine of impersonality advocated by Eliot, recoiled from the personal revelations contained in the book. But *Life Studies*, Lowell's favorite among his own books, is the book he will chiefly be remembered for. It maintains a balance between two of his main themes: domestic life and public life. Addressing *Life Studies* together with W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (also published in 1959), Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish* (1960), and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1965), the critic M. L. Rosenthal coined the term Confessional Poetry to describe this new trend of personal revelation springing from lives characterized by extreme behavior. "Lowell winced at the term. It implies helpless outpouring, secrets whispered with an artlessness that is their badge of authenticity, the uncontrolled admission of guilt that attempts to wash away guilt," Bidart remarks in his brief essay, "On 'Confessional' Poetry," convincingly making the point that "Lowell's candor is an illusion created by art. He always insisted that his so-called confessional poems were in significant ways invented. The power aimed at in *Life Studies* is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention."

Life Studies excels in many ways. The first of these is the way the book is organized. Its four parts are a triumph of contextualization. The center of the book is Lowell's attempt to understand his own madness, what he means when he says in "Skunk Hour," "My mind's not right." For a book about madness, *Life Studies* is remarkably sane, owing very much to a Freudian analysis of the type of family for which the word "dysfunctional" has been coined. Part One eases the reader in, with "Beyond the Alps," a poem that touches on Lowell's apostasy from the Catholicism to which he had converted in the Forties, a short poem invoking America in the Eisenhower era, and finally two dramatic monologues spoken by characters in mental distress. Part Two is a twenty-five-page prose piece, "91 Revere Street," which provides background and many details that could not easily be conveyed in verse. This piece has its comic and satirical moments—a side of Lowell not previously revealed in his writing—and has one purely fictional character, Billy Harkness, supposedly an Annapolis classmate of Lowell's father. Part Three contains tragicomic portraits of four writers—Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane—for whom Lowell felt affinities. Part Four gets to the heart of the matter, with painful and affectionately ambivalent treatments of his parents and "studies" of his own troubled life.

Lowell is at his best in this book, which is troubling, highly readable, and absorbing. Critics have made the point that in *Life Studies* he reclaimed for poetry some of the territory it had lost to the novel. If the poet himself is at the book's center, one comes away from reading it remembering at least a dozen other vivid personalities. Some reviewers accused Lowell of snobbery because of his focus on the upper-class Boston world in which he was raised, but couldn't Tolstoy justly be accused of the same thing? In the cases of both the Russian and the American, they wrote about the worlds they

were familiar with. It's a pleasure to reread these wonderful poems in Bidart and Gewanter's edition. "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," written first in prose and then rearranged in a very loose free verse, evokes the leisurely, old-fashioned life at Lowell's grandfather's summer place with marvelous lyrical passages:

What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins
floating shoulder-high?
It was sunset, Sadie and Nellie
bearing pitchers of ice-tea,
oranges, lemons, mint, and peppermints,
and the jug of shandygaff,
which Grandpa made by blending half and
half
yeasty, wheezing homemade sarsaparilla with
beer.

Into this idyll slips the specter of death in the person of Lowell's uncle, rendered in the same painterly strokes as the passage I have just quoted, with images from a child's vivid imagination:

He was as brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
His face was putty.
His blue coat and white trousers
grew sharper and straighter.
His coat was a blue jay's tail,
his trousers were solid cream from the top of
the bottle.
He was animated, hierarchical,
like a gingersnap man in a clothes-press.
He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's
disease.

Life Studies represents the peak of Lowell's achievement. But he followed it with three brilliant collections: *Imitations* (1961) is a book of very free translations from many languages, some of which Lowell knew, some of which he did not (he had been a classics major at Kenyon). *For the Union Dead* (1963) is the successor volume to *Life Studies* and contains some of his most memorable work, including the title poem, a stirring Civil War elegy that is at the same time a poem about Civil Rights and a

jeremiad against contemporary American society. *Near the Ocean* (1967) completes the circle of technical experimentation that began with the free verse and loosely formal, slant-rhymed poems of *Life Studies*, because the title sequence employs tetrameter couplets, one of the most difficult verse-forms in English. Imagine the iambic pentameter couplet shortened by one foot. The best examples of this form can be found in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and A. E. Housman's "Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff."

Lowell uses the short couplets for several purposes in this sequence. "Fourth of July in Maine" takes the guise of a letter in verse to his cousin Harriet Winslow, who gave the poet and his family their house in Castine. As a sort of report to his cousin in Washington, the poem, by describing the Fourth of July in this small New England town, meditates on the decline of the region and of the American sense of patriotism and religion. There's room within this framework for news about Lowell's daughter Harriet, named after his cousin, and even for her guinea pigs: "only a vegetarian God/ could look on them and call them good." Enervation is a familiar topic for Lowell, the result of his exhausting manic-depressive cycles, as well as of his sustaining but contentious marriage to the writer and critic Elizabeth Hardwick, which is neatly sketched in these lines:

And here in your converted barn,
we burn our hands a moment, borne
by energies that never tire
of piling fuel on the fire;
monologue that will not hear,
logic turning its deaf ear,
wild spirits and old sores in league
with inexhaustible fatigue.

Much as his rebellious nature needed to be restrained, he seldom stayed happy for long with constraints—the constraints of marriage, custom, law, social norms of all kinds. In "Waking Early Sunday Morning," he even feels hemmed in by the poetic rhetoric

he has created, the latest in a succession of styles that characterized his career. When he was a boy at boarding school he took on the nickname Cal, short for both Shakespeare's unruly Caliban and the mad Roman Emperor Caligula. In his manic flights of fancy he identified with figures of political power, even those he hated. His poem "Stalin," from *History*, ends with a few lines which leave open the question of ultimate comprehension, but certainly grope toward an understanding:

Stalin? What shot him clawing up the tree of
power—
millions plowed under with the crops they
grew,
his intimates dying like the spider-
bridegroom?
The large stomach could only chew success.
What raised him
was an unusual lust to break the icon,
joke cruelly, seriously, and be himself.

I wouldn't claim this is the last word on the twentieth century's greatest murderer; but it does suggest certain things. "What raised him" hints at the sexual allure of power, and the last lines offer some insight into the man's essential nature. In addition there is a little of Lowell himself in the portrait. Though Lowell was an utterly serious man, he too could joke cruelly to those around him, and he never wanted to be anything other than himself—though that was not as simple a proposition as it may sound. Here is a stanza about Lyndon Johnson, the president who succeeded Lowell's beloved JFK:

O to break loose. All life's grandeur
is something with a girl in summer . . .
elated as the President
girdled by his establishment
this Sunday morning, free to chaff
his own thoughts with his bear-cuffed staff,
swimming nude, unbuttoned, sick
of his ghost-written rhetoric!

The progress of Lowell's poetry up to this

point is familiar ground. The inevitable and controversial sticking-point when one attempts a definitive evaluation of his achievement is one's estimation of the unrhymed "sonnets," one of which I quoted near the beginning of this essay. *Notebook* (1969) was later transformed into three books, all published in 1973: *The Dolphin*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *History*. *The Dolphin* and *For Lizzie and Harriet* continue Lowell's work in the domestic vein; *History* continues his work on big political and historical themes. To understand how important the "big work" was in Lowell's *oeuvre*, one has to look at what was a widely accepted model for a twentieth-century poetic career: that of Ezra Pound. A poet's life-work, it has traditionally been felt, must be rounded off by something approaching an epic. In Pound's case this was the *Cantos*. In the case of Eliot, the capstone work was, unsatisfactorily it seems to me, the *Four Quartets*. Hart Crane had *The Bridge*; William Carlos Williams had his *Paterson*. This model for a poetic career actually begins as early as the late seventeenth century, if one thinks of the verse epics of Milton and Dryden. It certainly continues through the eighteenth, with Pope's works including long pieces like the *Essay on Criticism* and the *Essay on Man* and even the mock-epic *Rape of the Lock*; these works paralleled and complemented the verse translations of classical epics which were a staple in the careers of poets in the Augustan Age and even before. We should look at a long poem like Wordsworth's *Prelude* as both a continuation of this tradition and a radical redefinition, because here the epic becomes personalized in its Romantic focus on the poet as hero. Byron's *Don Juan* is certainly a far cry from Virgil's *Aeneas*.

These big works all being modeled on the classical epic, expectations that poets and their readers brought to the epic—the founding of a nation or empire, the role played in this endeavor by a hero understood through the standards of classical antiquity—are as relevant to the big twen-

tieth-century poems as they were to those of Pope, Byron, and Wordsworth. Of course in the age of Modernism these expectations are often met ironically or in a deflationary way. Pound defined an epic as a "poem including history"—which updates the classical notion of nation and founding hero. Certainly this model influenced Lowell. One tends to forget what a major figure Pound was for his successors. In terms of classical models, however, the *Cantos* do not put a hero figure center-stage except allusively. Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* is an anti-hero, and a major figure is not defined in the *Cantos*; the figure of the poet stands behind it all, but invisibly, like Polonius behind the arras. The hero of *The Bridge* is the Brooklyn Bridge itself; the town of Paterson is the eponymous hero of Williams's poem. What an American, Whitmanian idea these poems embody! In undertaking his own epic, Lowell was undoubtedly also influenced by the *Dream Songs* of his friend and competitor John Berryman, which, if they lack an epic theme, at least have a hero, Henry, who is as different from Ulysses or Beowulf or Aeneas as one can imagine.

I think Lowell was chiefly influenced by the verse unit that Berryman uses, an eighteen-line form composed of three six-line stanzas. Consider that the traditional epic had been stichic rather than stanzaic, a distinction that is easily understood if one compares the different effects produced by the repeating dactylic hexameters of the classical epic and the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* and *The Prelude* on the one hand, and the stanzas used by both Byron and Berryman on the other. A stichic organization tends to enhance the overall unity of the long poem, while a stanzaic organization calls attention to its individual parts. Lowell's choice of the fourteen-line unit, which at least alludes to the sonnet even when it owes little to it structurally, is a virtuosic concept on the face of it. But *History* lacks the unifying presence of a central character, even one as fragmented as Ber-

ryman's drunken and babbling creature, Henry. I'm not claiming that the *Dream Songs* are, overall, a success by comparison, but in my view both the *Cantos* and *History* are finally unsatisfactory because they lack a unifying point of view. Undoubtedly in each case the poet's sensibility is meant to be the glue that holds it all together.

History is a marvelous grab-bag of a collection. I love sitting with it for an hour, searching though it randomly. In classical epics like the *Odyssey*, hero and theme go hand in hand: Ulysses and his long search for home are one and the same. Likewise if one does wish to apply a classical epic standard to *History* and identify a unified hero and theme, then the hero is clearly Lowell himself, and the theme is, obviously, history. So the poem gives us a man who embodies the search for the meaning of history.

My dissatisfaction with it as a whole has several aspects. One problem with these poems has to do with tone. "Near the Ocean" ends with a vision of a new, directionless America:

. . . until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime.

Unfortunately some of that sublime monotony entered Lowell's own rhetoric in *History*. Often a poem in the series will become vague, particularly toward the end, with a sense of the rhetoric becoming inflated and abstract with no particular focus, as at the end of an elegy to Theodore Roethke: "Omnipresent, the Mother made you non-existent,/ you, the ocean's anchor and high out-tide." What does it mean to be "the ocean's anchor and high out-tide"? One might contrast this ending to that of an earlier elegy from *Life Studies*, "Ford Madox Ford," which ends simply but definitively, "Ford,/ you were a kind man and you died in want," or with the memorable last line of "Eye and Tooth" from *For the Union Dead*: "I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil." Often the poems will rise to a rhetorically

inflated ending whose frame of reference is unsatisfactorily broad. "Our Dead Poets" illustrates the same problem in its ending:

Sometimes for days I only hear your voices,
the sun of summer will not adorn you again
with her garment of new leaves and flowers . . .
her *nostalgie de la boue* that shelters ape
and protozoa from the rights of man.

Even the "Our" in the title is part of the problem. Lowell had left what he regarded as the provincial backwater of Boston for the cultural capital of New York roughly around the time of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*. In succeeding years he became the all-but-official spokesman for the intellectual establishment, his poems often appearing in the *New York Review of Books*. Here is the ending of "Two Walls," subtitled "1968, Martin Luther King's Murder":

At this point of civilization, this point of the
world,
the only satisfactory companion we
can imagine is death—this morning, skin
lumping in my throat,
I lie here, heavily breathing, the soul of New
York.

If a poet *could* become "the soul of New York," that would obviously give him a powerful voice and platform. But in my view Lowell was not well served either by his adoption of the first-person plural or of his semi-official status as poet laureate of the New York intellectuals. When one compares Lowell's New York poetry to the much more engaging work done there by Frank O'Hara and Walt Whitman, one might conclude that it's better for a poet to be poor, young, and on foot in the city, rubbing elbows with construction workers and the crowds on the street, than to be a distinguished man taking taxis, going to the opera and literary cocktail parties, and living on Central Park West.

The Dolphin was an improvement, because it was so much more personal and urgent: "What shall I do with my stormy life

Flawed, problematic, with what he probably intended as his crowning achievement falling short of his hopes for it, Lowell remains a major poet and a force to be reckoned with. He did, as he told Frank Bidart he hoped to, change the rules of the game in poetry. Was he the last "major poet" in the English language? Perhaps another one will come along, though there's been little evidence of it since Lowell's death in 1977. Our taste these days tends to run toward the more unassuming *oeuvres* of poets like Lowell's friends Elizabeth Bishop, who published only about 100 poems in her lifetime and would have laughed self-deprecatingly at the idea of producing an epic, and Seamus Heaney, who has made a virtue of his own modesty.

No wonder nearly 3000 years later we still find these stories charming and fascinating and continually examine them to find what meaning they might hold for us. The approaches to Greek mythology have long been pleasingly various. Some scholars have found in them a message that transcends all cultures and centuries, a vision of human heroism, of quest and achievement. On this view, the Greeks are seen to be very much like ourselves. Yet a rather different approach, prominent in the closing decades of the twentieth century, treats the myths more as Marxists do history or Freudians do dreams. The surface narrative is held sus-

pect. Each element must be examined to find its symbolic and associative meaning. Once the code has been cracked, the message of this story (or dream) can then be interpreted. In this approach, practiced most exhilaratingly by French Structuralist classicists, the Greeks often turn out to be very exotic and different from us in their ways of seeing their world, its elements, and the place of humanity within it. But this method of reading mythology depends on gathering information and references from the far-flung wreckage of classical antiquity. And the dramatic results often come from juxtaposing bits and pieces drawn from the most disparate types of sources, and from authors separated from each other by so much time and space that one might reasonably expect the various bits of code to be less than fully compatible.

In *Greek Gods, Human Lives*, the classics scholar Mary Lefkowitz proposes a more narrowly focused undertaking using an apparently simple method. Maintaining a tight focus, Lefkowitz examines extended works of Greek and Roman literature in which the gods play a significant role. Lefkowitz recounts these narratives in a detailed outline limited to the content and adhering to the structure of the original works in order to retain the authors' original emphasis and meaning. The book proceeds chronologically, beginning with Hesiod, Homer, and the major Homeric Hymns. There are two chapters for Greek tragedy, the main mythological literature to survive from the classical period. These chapters are followed by a treatment of the Gods in Hellenistic poetry (literature that flourished in the world after the death of Alexander the Great but before the Roman empire solidified its hold on the Mediterranean world). Lefkowitz then devotes a chapter to Virgil's *Aeneid*. A final chapter briefly considers early critics of traditional Greek religion and myth and looks at alternative views that arose and found voice in late Latin literature. The book concludes with some general reflections.

Lefkowitz finds a consistent picture from the beginnings of Greek literature through the classical period. Powerful and knowledgeable gods act in their own interests and for their own pleasure. The gods' entry into the mortal world brings joy and pain variously to men but without reliable regard for human piety or innocence. The gods' concern for their own honor and for their own quarrels leads to actions that bring pain and death not only to mortals who have offended the gods but to innocents as well.

Yet, as Lefkowitz notes, Greek religion does not present a random universe of chaos and disorder. The Greeks called the universe the *kosmos*, a word the meaning of which at the very least is "order" and which usually implies a beautiful order. What could be the order of a universe in which innocent mortals are crushed by the actions of proud, lustful, and vengeful gods? Lefkowitz demonstrates that the Greek mythological and literary narratives often show that a form of justice and order ultimately prevails, especially when Zeus, the most powerful of the Greek gods, is interested. But such justice is realized on a divine scale, which means that it may take much more time to evolve than a single mortal life affords. Wrongs done to the innocent or by the guilty and that disrupt the universal order may be righted only generations later. And even then the late redress may entail further tragedy for additional innocents.

In a world of such complex order, knowledge becomes valuable. The more one knows of the ways and desires of these powerful controlling gods, the greater the chance of avoiding or at least surviving catastrophe. So many Greek myths emphasize the limits of human knowledge even as they show mortals struggling to understand their universe. And thus a myth that may well have originated as a tale to explain why men of the tribe do not fight with their male relatives or sleep with their female ones becomes, in Greek hands, Sophocles' tragedy of Oedipus the king. The world's cleverest solver of riddles is

crushed first by his lack of knowledge and then, with that cruel irony so characteristic of tragedy, by blinding illumination.

In addition to Lefkowitz's main emphasis, many smaller points emerge through her outlines of actions, points that will provide insight and provoke thought both for those new to Greek mythology and for more seasoned scholars of the ancient world. Is it pressing the book's main point too hard to include a summary of the *Iliad's* catalogue of ships because an opening request to the Muses emphasizes the importance of divine aid to human endeavor? Or does this nod to divinity further justify a list that so often generates impatience? In pointing out Zeus' part in pushing Achilles' friend Patroclus beyond his limits and towards his death in battle, is it fair to emphasize (as Lefkowitz does) lines that were questioned in antiquity and are still held suspect by some scholars? Or does the recognition of pervasive Olympian power help to support the relevance of these verses?

Perhaps more interesting and valuable are the insights that arise from Lefkowitz's insistent emphasis on divine action in contrast with parallel mortal efforts. We see human limits more sharply when Lefkowitz points out how, in the *Iliad*, Poseidon can so easily and quickly cross immense distances to do his business, whereas it takes the greatest effort and divine help for the mortal Priam to cover the small distance between Troy and Achilles' tent so that he can beg for the corpse of his son Hector. Similarly, although the gods of the *Aeneid* can and do settle their quarrels instantly when they wish, mortal strife such as that between Aeneas and Turnus entails complications and rancorous hatred that cannot so easily be halted and healed. As Lefkowitz repeatedly points out, the careless ease of the gods' existence provides a brilliant foil for our darker lives of care and toil.

When we leave the classical Greek world for Hellenistic and Roman society, the literary atmosphere changes, and the nature and place of the gods in that later literary world

shifts as well. Lefkowitz emphasizes two noticeable elements: first, the gods become generally more distant; second, when they and their supernatural world erupt into the mortal sphere, the divine manifestations seem increasingly fantastic and unnatural. Here Lefkowitz sees an increasing emphasis on the powerlessness of mortals. Others might see more the result of the bookish artifice and *recherché* taste of Alexandria and Rome. Lefkowitz notes that Virgil crafts the visit of Venus to her son Aeneas so that it is a recognizable allusion to the goddess's earlier appearance to Aeneas' father as described in the Greek Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*.

Of course, such complex and learned allusion need not be incompatible with the poetic exposition of sincere religious belief. If it were, students would not have *Paradise Lost* to struggle with. Yet Virgil more than once makes learned poetic allusion to the divine world in ways that emphasize its fundamental opaqueness to mortal view. Among the artworks of Carthage described in the *Aeneid* is a scene from the *Iliad* in which the Trojan women take robes to a statue of Athena to ask for her help. Homer tells us that the goddess refused the request. But when Virgil rewrites the scene in Italy, he remains silent as to the goddess's reaction. Similarly, when Zeus weighs the souls of Hector and Achilles in the *Iliad*, Homer tells us which way those scales fall; Virgil rewrites the scene for Aeneas and Turnus but pointedly does not report how fate moves the scales. At the very least, knowledge and understanding of the gods are even more difficult to find in Virgil's world than they were in that of classical Greek literature. Some might suspect some deeper skepticism on Virgil's part.

As Lefkowitz notes, the loose and shifting world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is not amenable to a sense of overall justice or order, even on a divine scale. Ovid's kaleidoscopic narrative produces a dazzling sequence of images formed from polished bits of mythic material. But there is no larger divine purpose or pattern to connect one design to another. Here we have arrived in a

world truly alien to that of Homer and the Greeks in which the universe could be defined as *kosmos*, a thing of order and beauty, even if its aesthetic structure is not always to be discerned or appreciated on a human scale.

Lefkowitz proposes that the traditional mythology of the Greeks was abandoned not because its monsters and miracles were incredible but rather because it was all too uncomfortably realistic. It is not easy to live in a world full of powerful forces that are difficult to understand and that provide no assurance that the pious and good will be rewarded, where bad and good mortals alike are making their way towards inevitable death without the hope of eternal bliss awaiting them.

It is perhaps surprising that the ancient vision Lefkowitz describes is not entirely grim. Her analysis brings out the beauty and advantage that can derive from such a harsh view of the gods and their world. The divine Dione may comfort her daughter Aphrodite and tenderly wipe the *ichor* from her wound, but the Greek gods are unlikely to provide such tenderness to mortals. Yet just such a mythology shows off human affection to greater advantage. When Hector explains to his wife, Andromache, why he must go into battle, their frightened child can make his parents laugh even as they ache. After Hector expresses his love so eloquently, Andromache sheds a huge tear as she keeps turning back to see her husband recede into the distance where his death awaits. Love and loss—loss such as only mortals can feel—are inextricably bound together. Such love draws Odysseus away from a goddess and back to Penelope. In a world where no god can be relied on to love us all, to save us from disaster, or to provide justice in our lives, we may ourselves be driven more urgently to provide the gifts of justice, salvation, and love for each other.

Such, as this deeply humane book makes clear, is the message that Greek gods brought to human lives. If only we could learn from it.

The disaster parade

*Blake Bailey A Tragic Honesty:
The Life and Work of Richard Yates.*
Picador, 683 pages, \$35

reviewed by Eric Ormsby

Anyone who aspires to write the Great American Novel should read Blake Bailey's new biography of Richard Yates and think twice. By turns modest and affable, psychotic and raging, courteous to a fault and touchy to the point of derangement, this dapper, handsome, immensely appealing man could turn after a drink or two into the cruellest, most irrational, and abusive monster of paranoid monomania imaginable. The wonder is that this baffled self-tormentor, who razed a drunken path through life like a whiskey-fueled twister, wrote some of the coolest, most lucid, and magisterial novels and short stories of the past half-century. Even better, he gave us characters who live on in our imaginations with the poignancy of lost friends. Who can ever forget the desperately deluded mother of *The Easter Parade* with her ludicrous nickname ("Pookie") and her thwarted artistic and social aspirations, or her undeluded but equally desperate daughter Emily whose life unravels so terribly in the final pages?

From *Revolutionary Road*, his justly acclaimed first novel of 1961, to the long overdue *Collected Stories* of 2001, Yates looked on all his subjects, however squalid and however sunny, with an equitable eye. What this cost him, especially with regard to his extravagantly selfish and destructive mother (nicknamed "Dookie"), whom he came to loathe and yet could not stop writing about, stands exposed in all its wincing minutiae in Bailey's pages. Yates's prose may be cool but, to his credit, he never affected the Olympian stance of, say, Joyce whose artistic god sat "paring his fingernails" before the spectacle of the world. Yates's pitilessness of eye is a function of his compassion. He never stands above his per-

sonages. The pathos in his fiction always emerges from exact depiction. And it is the strange melange of his measured, calibrated, intentionally flat language with the most piercing, if unstated, empathy that makes his work almost unbearably painful to read.

It may seem faint praise to laud Yates's equitable eye, but this is perhaps the rarest of writerly virtues. Chekhov, whom Yates revered, possessed it in abundance. And Chekhov's dictum "The aim of fiction is absolute and utter honesty" might have been Yates's own. Honesty to life, in all its manifestations, constituted Yates's artistic credo; his unwavering loyalty to the truth, to "getting it right," is apparent on every page. Whether he is describing a man tying his shoes or the sudden dissolution of a long-held hope, we immediately feel that yes, this is the way it must have been; those small accumulating recognitions underlie the sense of complicity we experience, however reluctantly, with his most forlorn and self-deceiving characters. In the end, we realize, Emily Grimes or Frank Wheeler or the schoolteacher Miss Price, blinded by her own well-meaningness (in the marvellous story "Dr. Jack-o'-Lantern" from *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*), along with a host of others, are not that much different from ourselves; indeed, are in an uncomfortable sense ourselves. And Yates's honesty, which was at once brutal and subtle, forms the noblest leitmotif in the long sorry tally of his days.

For the subtle side of his honesty, consider a passage from "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired," one of his finest short stories, in which the narrator describes the courtyard where he and his sister are sent to play by their grandiose and scatty mother:

She always called the courtyard "the garden," though nothing grew there except a few stunted city trees and a patch of grass that never had a chance to spread. Mostly it was bald earth, interrupted here and there by brick paving, lightly powdered with soot and scattered with the droppings of dogs and cats. It may have been six or eight houses long, but it

was only two houses wide, which gave it a hemmed-in, cheerless look; its only point of interest was a dilapidated marble fountain, not much bigger than a birdbath, which stood near our house. The original idea of the fountain was that water would drip evenly from around the rim of its upper tier and tinkle into its lower basin, but age had unsettled it; the water spilled in a single ropy stream from the only inch of the upper tier's rim that stayed clean. The lower basin was deep enough to soak your feet in on a hot day, but there wasn't much pleasure in that because the underwater part of the marble was coated with brown scum.

If Philip Larkin was "deprivation's laureate," Richard Yates might aptly be termed "disappointment's laureate." The quiet force of the above passage turns on its opening phrase, in which the mother's pretensions are glancingly alluded to. No comment on these is needed; the ensuing description says all. Its pathos arises from the fact that it is a child who is describing "the garden" in studiously neutral terms. We know, without being told, that the courtyard demarcates the boundaries of his possibilities and that the fountain stands, not as a symbol, but as a marble embodiment of all disillusion, then and in the years to come. And the "brown scum" with which the paragraph closes conveys a tactile sense of that disillusion; like all of Yates's best touches, it makes us squirm a bit as we read. We recognize, with the narrator, what lies beneath "the underwater part of the marble."

Yates's best novels and short stories are filled with such masterly small effects. He is the most Flaubertian of our great novelists; just as Charles Bovary's whole future dangles from the savage description of his unsuitable cap in the opening of *Madame Bovary* or the magical evocation of Emma's parasol, in which all her beauty and delusion are shimmeringly mirrored, so too, in Yates's fiction, plain, mute objects stand as complex witnesses and emblems of his characters' unarticulated destinies. Symbols were anathema to Yates—Bailey documents

his distaste well—and the things that surround and accompany his characters are never symbolic but function somewhat like choruses in ancient tragedy, confirming and crystallizing what we know but the protagonists do not.

Bailey's biography of Yates is neither heartening nor pleasant to read. The story he has to tell is simply too gruelling. If his two favourite adjectives on page after page are "boozy" and "roach-infested," it is hard to know, in all fairness, how he might have varied them, given Yates's habits and living conditions. As a minute and obsessively detailed depiction of the "foul rag-and-bone shop" from which our Yates's ladder started, the biography is certainly indispensable; yet, in all candor, I found myself wondering whether I really wanted or needed to know so much about each of Yates's catastrophic collapses—not only the roaring binges and tantrums but the spells of amnesia, of outright insanity, the ugly and oblivious mistreatment of lovers, friends, and family, the sheer demoniac progress of Yates's own unrelenting self-demolition. Hardly a page is without its explosive cough, duly documented, resulting from Yates's four-pack-a-day smoking habit (even when fitted with an oxygen tank for a collapsed lung and emphysema, he insisted on smoking); confronted by his daughter on the dangers of his habit, especially in the vicinity of oxygen, Yates snapped, "Media hype." Yates's alcoholism may have been in a class of its own; spirituous fumes seem to rise from the page as one staggers down the stages of yet another of his bibulous bouts, the sight of which would have driven even Pantagruel to the nearest AA meeting.

One would expect such an account to inspire pity and terror and in other hands it might have done so. Blake Bailey writes briskly and clearly (though one imagines how Yates might have reacted to sentences like "As the clouds of puberty gathered around him, he began to resent his life"). Moreover, he is admirably assiduous and has interviewed almost everyone who befriended Yates; he knows the work inside

and out, including unpublished drafts and manuscripts. He has selected a superb range of photographs which graphically detail Yates's physical decline from stunningly handsome youth to hunched decrepitude. No gin bottle or cigarette butt has been left unturned in this wretched inventory, and yet something larger seems missing. In a nice turn of phrase, Bailey terms Yates a "grimly precise writer" but the description would apply better to his biographer. Yates is often grim and precise but he is also much more than that; even in his most dispassionate "omniscient narrator" mode, Yates's omniscience has a broken-hearted feel. In reading *A Tragic Honesty*, one cannot help but feel the sharp disjunction between Bailey's breezily clinical manner and the excruciating details of the tale he has to tell. At moments this produces a certain inadvertent, rather Nabokovian, humor; thus, when Bailey attempts to "talk the talk" and incorporate Yates's own self-description, he stumbles, as here: "The man seems to have taken pity on Yates, though his typical mood toward the forlorn fuckup was, apparently, exasperation." Come again? Though it isn't really Bailey's fault—he isn't Yates and doesn't pretend to be—the effect of such disjunctions over so long a book is to make Yates appear, with his lofty and frustrated ambitions and impossible expectations, like a crusty and blustering Don Quixote saddled by a Sancho Panza with a spread-sheet.

That said, there are many wonderful episodes recounted here, especially from Yates's earlier years. The whole account of "the good school" (which Yates was later to evoke in *A Good School* of 1978, one of his best novels) is interesting and often hilarious. Avon School, in the Connecticut woods, which Yates attended from 1939–1944, had been founded by a wealthy eccentric named Mrs. Riddle who was given to such edifying maxims as "A slovenly, slouching lad is pleasing to no one." There Yates became editor of *The Avonian* and art director of the school yearbook named (really!) *The Winged Beaver*. Mrs. Riddle

had adopted this improbable beast as the school mascot in accord with her philosophy, which Bailey wittily summarizes thus: "No matter how modest one's abilities, if one persevered like a certain tenacious long-toothed rodent, then there were no heights to which one could not aspire."

From *The Winged Beaver* there might seem to be no way to go but up. In fact, his school years may have been among Yates's happiest. Even when his one undisputed success occurred with the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, he was in St. Vincent's Hospital recovering from booze-induced mania. Success and failure haunted Yates; though utterly inept at negotiating the shark-thick eddies of the New York publishing world, he persisted intrepidly, the victim of bad luck as much as of his own ineptitude. A life-long ambition, for example, was to have a short story accepted by *The New Yorker*, and he seems to have been inconsolable when this never transpired. With hindsight we can say that the loss was *The New Yorker's* rather than Yates's, but to him such consolation would have been meaningless. He was obsessed with prizes, reviews, awards, and fellowships. Envious and bitterly resentful of more successful contemporaries such as Saul Bellow and John Updike, he seems to have been poisoned by literary rancor as much as by alcohol. In fact, all comments on Yates's career tend to agree in proclaiming him "unjustly neglected" and "long overdue for recognition," etc. I have shared this opinion since first reading *Revolutionary Road* thirty or so years ago; however, after immersing myself in Bailey's biography, I have to wonder whether any amount of acclaim would ever have been enough for Yates: his thirst for renown seems to have quite as intense as his thirst for bourbon and about as unquenchable.

That Yates knew disappointment intimately and that he suffered every gradation of disillusion in the cruellest and most personal way is no doubt part of what gives his fiction its incomparable authenticity; the

other, and greater, part, of course, is his astonishing skill at his craft. Yates was quite definite in considering himself a "realist" and certainly he succeeds almost better than anyone else in making us see and feel and smell the narrow and harrowing world of his characters. But in reading and re-reading his work I have come to wonder whether Yates is not considerably more than a realistic chronicler of American society over the past forty or fifty years. In fact, the more I read him, the more he reminds me of Kafka; though an utterly secular Kafka, to be sure.

Yates's characters, like Kafka's, are all enmeshed in the toils of unreasonable or misplaced hopes. Hope is the poison on which they eagerly feed and on which they sicken and die, usually with intolerable slowness. But if false hope, or "hope for the wrong thing," as Eliot put it, kills them in the end, hope also gives them a certain feisty and intractable stamina. Like Josef K. in *The Trial* or the unnamed protagonist "before the Law," they never surrender their tightly clutched expectations. And Yates, again like Kafka, is a master of embarrassment, of that slowly twisting embarrassment from which we cringe and step back. In Kafka, shame is always a spectacle; onlookers stare through the windows or mill about the once-private bedrooms in which his hapless figures lie abruptly exposed. At the end of *The Easter Parade*, the sudden disintegration of Emily Grimes before the smooth, spiffy, well-buffed veneer of her nephew's perfect suburban life induces the sickening sensation all uncontrollable humiliations inspire. The numerous small expectations that have poisoned Emily's failed life erupt in a display of venom, and we flinch. Just as Kafka projected intense anxieties and private dreads into the humdrum actual of social life, so too does Yates: what we most fear for ourselves actually happens to Yates's characters. They are exposed as failures and see their most secret hopes dragged out into the daylight. Exposure is ruin in Yates's world, for it blocks all escape routes, and yet exposure is inevitable and

horribly exact. “There was no way out,” repeats the ape trained as a human in Kafka’s “Report for the Academy.” For the men and women and children in Yates’s work there is no way out either and it is their gradual or abrupt realization of this that provides both the drama and the heartbreak of his tales.

Yates perfected the techniques of realism not merely to give us the look and smell and feel of the world but also—again, like Kafka—in order to lift his stories to the level of fable. There is a point at which the most lovingly and stubbornly crafted realism touches the hallucinatory and it seems to me that Yates achieves this over and over again. If his stories live on in us and recur like our own most hurtful remembrances, that is because he arrived by painstaking fidelity to the actual at something deeper and more lasting than the surfaces he so faithfully rendered. In Bailey’s biography, Yates comes across as a tragic bungler in almost every aspect of his life; his delusions were colossal, his attempts at evasion botched. Only his clearsightedness—and only at his writing desk—remained inviolable to the end. If the power of his fictions lies in the cunning complicity with which they involve us in lives that appear small, mean, deluded and doomed, that is because, like all enduring fables, they are our lives as well or, at the very least, the lives we fear may be ours.

The Steiner school

George Steiner

Lessons of the Masters.

Harvard University Press,
198 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

A book about great teachers—by George Steiner? One’s eyes narrow suspiciously. But no, he is in chastened mood. “Why have I been remunerated,” he asks, “for what is my oxygen and *raison d’être*?” Tactfully he avoids answering that question, evoking in-

stead his weekly seminars at Geneva, where he and his students (now dispersed “on five continents”) would study *Phaedrus* or *The Tempest* and he would “introduce (falteringly) *The Brothers Karamazov*.” The university teacher, heir of Socrates, Jesus, and Buddha, thus enjoys “touches of grace and hope.” Why, he later concedes, “even at a humble level—that of the schoolmaster—to teach, to teach well, is to be accomplice to transcendent possibility”: for who knows whether that solemn little boy in the back row might not turn out to be a budding George Steiner?

Speaking as someone who has operated “at a humble level” for as long as Steiner was in Geneva, I may tell him that I, too, have taught *Phaedrus* and *The Tempest*—and the passage from Proust on the death of Bergotte which he also mentions. Not *Karamazov*, admittedly, but one can only do so much at a humble level. Even so, I cheer myself with the reflection that my students would not, as he does, believe Plato’s Socrates as a character to be “comparable if not superior to” Falstaff, Hamlet, or Anna Karenina, or claim that the Platonic dialogues are “as intricately plotted as Henry James’s,” or think that Hermann Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* is a novel to admire. In the customarily wide range of Steiner’s survey, one figure eludes him. Shakespeare is silent, he thinks, about the master/disciple relationship. (He forgets, apparently, Falstaff’s role as a kind of parodic Socrates to Prince Hal.) Of course, as Steiner says, Shakespeare was suspicious of academic authority; he never attended a university seminar, and had Hamlet gone to Geneva rather than Wittenberg he might have been spared much perplexity.

Amid the pomposity, portentousness, and vacuousness of Steiner’s prose—“the sweat of a monument” as James Wood brilliantly describes it in his lethal essay on Steiner in *The Broken Estate*—some important points struggle for survival. Yes, a great teacher does have a quasi-seductive appeal to the intellect. Yes, a great teacher is ultimately lonely, because if he has been suc-

cessful his pupils can do without him (think of the moving evaporation of Virgil from the *Divine Comedy*). Wittgenstein has a penetrating passage in *Culture and Value*:

A teacher may get good, even astounding, results from his pupils while he is teaching them and yet not be a good teacher; because it may be that, while his pupils are directly under his influence, he raises them to a height which is not natural to them, without fostering their own capacities for work at this level, so that they immediately decline again as soon as the teacher leaves the classroom. Perhaps this is how it is with me; I have sometimes thought so.

It was also true, I should say, of Leavis, who is often linked with Wittgenstein as a great twentieth-century teacher. And yes, the influence of great teaching is incommunicable; the *dicta* of Nadia Boulanger, one of the few women in a book whose title and incidental usages largely confine pedagogic greatness to males, are colorless, but it was her charisma, her physical presence, that mattered.

This is why Steiner's remarks about computer technology are as wrong as they could well be:

The screen can teach, examine, demonstrate, interact with a precision, a clarity, and a patience exceeding that of a human instructor. Its resources can be disseminated and enlisted at will. It knows neither prejudice nor fatigue. In turn, the apprentice can question, object, answer back in a dialectic whose pedagogic value may come to surpass that of spoken discourse.

No, no, and no again! For it is the presumed infallibility and inexhaustibility of the machine (Steiner must be able to afford much better ones than I can) which make it impossible for it to be a teacher of any kind, let alone a great one. The *mutual* taking of risks, the acceptance of error, the frustrations of nerve and intellect, the renewal of

will, the awareness of limited time and the corresponding sense of urgency are fundamental to the learning process. Teaching is a human act grounded in a human relationship. To call a computer a teacher is to pervert the word.

Among the most telling strokes in the book are the remarks on the American education system—much of which apply in Britain, too—with its belief in what Steiner, in a rare moment of epigrammatic crystallization, calls “the rights of all to be gifted.” The *ad hoc* instruction of Eliot by Pound, and, less happily, of Hemingway by Gertrude Stein, ossified into “creative writing” classes. “What would ‘non-creative writing’ be?” Steiner wonders, forgetting that the answer lies all around him in the products of those same classes.

He is on stronger ground in deploring the “travesty of responsible argument and scholarship” represented by “Pseudo-curricula” which “have been institutionalized at the price of indispensable disciplines.” A longer quotation shows him writing with unusual force and clarity:

The point is that for better or worse . . . our heritage in the west is that of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. The alphabet of our recognitions is that developed by “dead white males.” Our literary, philosophical, aesthetic touchstones are those of a European or North American core, often vividly influenced from outside and now qualified and enriched by ethnic plurality. To regard Sophocles or Dante or Shakespeare as somehow tainted by imperialist, colonialist mentality is idiocy pure and simple. To discard western poetry or the novel from Cervantes to Proust as “male chauvinistic” is blindness.

Amen to that, and he puts the blame precisely where it ought to be, on the university teachers who have abdicated their function at the behest of politically motivated minority pressure groups who have maneuvered themselves into positions of financial and administrative power. He adds, though perhaps more confidently

than the circumstances warrant, "The Sciences know no such folly," inhabiting a world where "The correctness is that of the equation, not the politics of cowardice." Yet the sciences too are humane disciplines, and we can all think of cases in which research funds have been deployed to promote some politically expedient but morally dubious cause.

As suggested above, the British system is in comparable disarray. The Education Secretary, Charles Clarke, has expressed open contempt for universities that wish to retain teachers of philosophy or medieval history (while conceding that a few museum specimens might be allowed to remain for the amusement of the public). Teachers at all levels, from reception class to postgraduate seminar, are hamstrung by a curriculum that demands that the maximum number of students be catered for at the minimum cost, and that hates ambition, excellence, vision, or originality. The possibility, not just of great teaching, but of adequate teaching, is menaced, for the liberties which are its lifeblood are denied. Steiner quotes a Harvard wisecrack on Jesus, "A fine teacher, but didn't publish"; neither he nor Socrates would get tenure today. For all their absurdities and flaws, Steiner and his book reflect a noble and, one fears, a doomed heritage.

Evocations

Irving Louis Horowitz

*Tributes: Personal Reflections
on a Century of Social Research.*
Transaction Publishers, 392 pages \$34.95

reviewed by Herbert I. London

In *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman asks a question that has been repeated by many contemporary Americans: "Why should I venerate and be ceremonious?" When egalitarians rule the cultural roost, veneration is to be eliminated like nuclear energy, and candor—interpreted as not revealing personal wants—is

the one trait that can excuse all personal faults. "Tell it like it is"—a cliché whose time has fortunately passed—is recalled as a criticism of most conventional ceremonies from the 1960s to the present.

While I would argue this distaste for veneration is now more extreme than it was in earlier periods, it is nonetheless an American tradition that goes back to the nineteenth-century transcendentalists, who associated tributes with deceit, circumlocution, and external appearances. A ritual deceremonialization often took the form of opposing authority, institutions, tradition, and tributes, although it had its positive side in the elevation of the common man and a romance with nature. Veneration of the past was the obstacle that stood in the way of liberation. It is what Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield agreed on even though they spoke with different generational voices, and it is the one slim thread that ties Hawthorne's fables to Charles Reich's jean-clad Con III hippies.

What Tom Wolfe and Christopher Lasch described as contemporary narcissism is in part related to the dislike of trumpery and tradition. It is what one does for oneself at this moment that counts. Obviously, it would be impossible to consider tributes when one doesn't have the time or the patience to do anything other than engage in self-fulfillment, which in its own unique way is fast becoming an unconventional rite at odds with conventions. The neo-narcissist is so concerned with realizing his potential that he reflexively avoids being locked into roles and commitments, much less bringing attention to the accomplishments of others.

The result of this disregard is that lives, even special lives, have no special meaning; they simply happen: there is no way of distinguishing between benchmark moments in history and any other time. The ties to an organic past are severed, setting us adrift in a sea of relative values. In the act of opposing formal tribute, we have undermined history; in our pursuit of equality, we have lost gallantry; in our self-concern, we have lost courtliness; in our desire for televised enter-

tainment, we have lost the ceremony of dinner conversation. There are more people who make excuses for those who refuse to pay tribute to others, but in the process our sense of decency is diminished and we cannot stand firm against that “fierce and riotous blaze”—Hawthorne’s phrase—around us.

In *Tributes*, Irving Louis Horowitz, the retired professor of sociology and political science at Rutgers University and author of *The Decomposition of Sociology* (1994), among many other books, engages us in a conversation with social thinkers who influenced his perspective. While he does not always agree with the scholars he describes, he notes—most generously in my view—“that civility and decency in human discourse” is not possible “if we select ideological purity as a litmus test for evaluating the work of others.” Figures as different as Russell Kirk and C. Wright Mills, for example, are treated with respect and unfailing fairness.

This is a book of great power; it evoked memories of distant days and tears for those I miss. It is hard to know what these people have in common other than crossing into I. L. Horowitz’s intellectual sphere. These creative talents may not be household names, but each in his idiosyncratic way was a creative force forging what we might loosely call the social theory of the twentieth century.

As Horowitz notes, reading these profiles allows one to engage in “this endlessly wonderful game of coming to terms with ourselves.” Horowitz clearly understands that paying tribute to others forces us to consider our likes and dislikes and offers order to a discordant universe. These thinkers parade through the corridors of history, opening and closing doors, and occasionally allow a light to burst into our mental lives that shatters illusions and frees us from the shadows of mythology.

Horowitz says this book is not autobiographical; he has published a childhood memoir entitled *Daydreams and Nightmares*. Yet as I see it, he has now written an inadvertent biographical statement, a recognition of the important voices that spoke to him

directly and indirectly. He notes that *Tributes* is “a way to put myself in a world beyond myself.” Surely these people helped to shape him, and just as surely the act of selection reveals a great deal about I. L. Horowitz, the scholar and man.

While it would be impossible in the confines of this review to consider the fifty profiles Horowitz presents, I have selected two people I know well to explain: C. Wright Mills and Peter Shaw.

Mills was *sui generis*; brilliant, acerbic, erratic, and, in the end, deeply ideological. Professor Horowitz notes accurately that near the end of his days Mills the radical became Mills the polemicist. I remember saying to him in a moment of audacity that his one-dimensional treatment of the United Fruit Company in *Listen Yankee!* was inconsistent with the evidence. With a wave of his hand I was dismissed, along with a comment that he had “a point to make.” Indeed he did, but it was a dangerous point and a point that offered intellectual ammunition for Castro sympathizers.

Peter Shaw by contrast was a level-headed polymath; gifted, enthusiastic, and careful in his assertions. One friend we had in common called Peter “the Fred Astaire of intellectuals.”

I. L. Horowitz is quite right in contending that Peter’s life merits celebration. Although he was not a trained social theorist, Peter stepped beyond the boundaries of literary criticism—his chosen field—and wrote poignantly on topics as varied as social dancing and cultural degradation.

If Mills grew antipathetic to American goals as he aged, Peter became increasingly fascinated with the roots of American discourse and habits. While Mills could be curt and crusty, Peter was invariably kind and gentlemanly. Nothing gave Peter greater satisfaction than being able to help a friend. He cared not a wit about credit or acclaim. Seeing others succeed was more than sufficient reward.

Horowitz quotes John Adams, who said, “I must think myself independent, as long as I live. The feeling is essential to my exist-

ence.” That, curiously enough, is an epitaph for both Peter Shaw and C. Wright Mills, and for many of the other distinguished scholars and authors Horowitz chose to profile.

Near the end of this interesting book, Horowitz tells of the encounter between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper, an encounter related by two journalists with the BBC and repeated by many others. Although what took place has entered the realm of mythology where various interpretations abound, one ten-minute engagement had the capacity to enlarge epistemological considerations of the past century.

Popper put forward a series of philosophical problems which Wittgenstein summarily dismissed. When Wittgenstein challenged Popper for an example of moral rule, Popper replied by invoking the claim, “Thou shalt not threaten visiting lecturers with pokers.” Supposedly Wittgenstein, who had been waving the poker, “threw the poker down and stormed out of the room, banging the door behind him.”

To his credit, Horowitz recognizes that the most important issue raised in this tale is the nature of knowledge as such. Surely solipsism and a touch of hubris are evident in the various renditions of Wittgenstein’s Poker, and just as surely the positivist (Wittgenstein) and questioner of scientific truth (Popper) viewed epistemological questions differently. To claim truth for either stance would be absurd; after all, it is the search that intoxicates even if the goal is elusive.

Let me return to Walt Whitman’s question: “Why should I venerate?” In the act of veneration, in paying tribute, we learn about our traditions. In the selection of those we choose to venerate, we learn about ourselves.

I. L. Horowitz has performed yet another valuable service in a career filled with achievement. He has given us a peek into his world and I, for one, am grateful to meet and revisit his advisers and friends. He ends on this telling note: “No higher purpose can be obtained than this fusion of who we are and how others made our existence possible and meaningful.” Amen.

Editor’s note: We wish to call our readers’ attention to the publication of *The Calligraphy Shop: Poems*, by Ben Downing (Zoo Press, \$14.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Hugh Kenner, 1923–2003

by Guy Davenport

In 1976 there appeared in bookstores *Geodesic Math and How to Use It* (University of California Press). The author was Hugh Kenner, whose next book would be *Joyce's Voices* (1978) and whose previous book had been *A Homemade World* (1975), a study of "the American Modernist Writers." Hugh Kenner's first book was about Chesterton, his second about Ezra Pound, his third about Wyndham Lewis, his fourth about James Joyce. Willard Goodwin's bibliography lists thirty-two books, 856 articles, and 200 contributions to collections of essays. His last book was a series of lectures, *The Elsewhere Community*, spoken ex tempore for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, transcribed.

His command of any subject was such that he could lecture without notes or script. He usually had a folder of blank pages, or letters from friends, that he pretended to be reading from, to assure audiences that he'd written out what he was saying. When he gave the Alexander Lectures at Toronto and was asked for the manuscript, so that they could be printed, he had to say, "Well, there isn't one."

Nor did he own a comb. His hair over the years became *Einsteinisch*. Being very hard of hearing, he repeated carefully what interlocutors said to him, to make certain he'd heard correctly. He therefore did most of the talking in a conversation. He once talked for three days at my house, when he was planning *The Stoic Comedians*. Part of

his discourse was a recitation of Beckett's unpublished novel *Mercier et Camier* that he'd memorized. There was also much about Alan Turing (about whom information at that time was largely anecdotal) and Charles Babbage, the *Stammvater* of the computer. Lewis Carroll, too; Hugh decided that he was the Emile Zola of England.

The English he could not abide, an animus apparent in his book about twentieth-century English literature, *A Sinking Island*, where his distaste is made articulate, damning, and not a little Swiftian. A *mot* going around at the time of the three-day visit ("Wagner is the Puccini of music") turns up twenty-seven years later as "W. H. Auden is the Graham Greene of literature." Hugh forgot nothing.

But back to the book about geodesic math. I have a feeling that it was the book Hugh found most interesting to write. It was in a previous book about R. Buckminster Fuller that he saw how Pound's ideogrammatic method in *The Cantos* works (supplemented later by a fascination with Benoit Mandelbrot's fractals). Pound had tied identifiable fragments of interesting cultures into self-interfering knots that float in a magnetic field. You read them by *looking* at them. The meaning is in the geometry.

Hugh singled out strong, complex minds to explain. Pound was gratifyingly counter-Liberal, as was Bucky Fuller and Joyce. And Wyndham Lewis and Beckett. These were

writers who studied the deployment of energy, and its failure. They do not all fit a pattern. They all had genius. "I only write about people smarter than I." So that when, for the sake of history he had to write about Virginia Woolf, he wonders why, daily chatting with the English translators of Freud, she never consulted a psychiatrist. He points out that there is no sex in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, only sodomy. There is a kind of civilized *Schadenfreude* in his having modern English writing be the work of the Americans Pound, Eliot, and Lewis; the Pole Conrad; and the Irish Joyce, Beckett, and Flann O'Brien.

On William F. Buckley's "Firing Line," Hugh resolutely refused to sanction the banning of the Marquis de Sade, whom Buckley was holding up (accurately) as a devil with seven horns and a lashing tail. "He wrote grammatical French," said Hugh, and had to repeat himself thrice. Buckley was forgetting that he was interviewing the most literate defender of *Ulysses* on the planet, who had once calmly explained that Joyce's soldier's calling Edward VII "my fucking bleeding king" was the right demotic for an adulterous hemophiliac. Hugh was modest rather than prudish; once, looking through my life-class drawings, he quickly flipped past the male nudes and lingered over the female ones. He admired Cocteau, but thought Allen Ginsberg a public nuisance. I had the feeling that Hugh was a displaced member of Samuel Johnson's circle (Pope was for him *the* poet for inexhaustible study). I have heard him anatomize a paragraph of Johnson's, showing how its words consistently answered to their Latin derivations. I don't know all that many people who have paragraphs of Johnson off by heart.

He was Canadian, the late-born child of a schoolmaster and a teacher, Welsh immigrants. "I don't think I had a childhood," he once said, though he let drop that he first heard the poetry of Baudelaire recited around a campfire by his scoutmaster, Pierre Trudeau. But at that time Hugh planned to be a mathematician. He was later interested

in Verlaine and Théophile Gautier, not Baudelaire.

Strangely, his first intellectual excitement was ignited by Herbert Marshall McLuhan, who was nuttier than we've been told about. But McLuhan had imagination and lively ideas. He showed Hugh how *Finnegans Wake* got written, and took him to St. Elizabeth's to meet Pound. He insisted that Hugh do a doctorate at Yale. They drifted apart, later. Around the 1970s McLuhan had written that maps came in at such-and-such a date in the Renaissance, before which we had no geographical sense. I watched Hugh type a postcard to McLuhan: *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres. Yours, Hugh.*

The Pound Era is his masterpiece. *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* was written in two months (on a picnic table outside a cabin in the Canadian woods); *The Pound Era* took ten years. While it was in the making, he published two wittily perceptive diversions, *The Stoic Comedians* and *The Counterfeiters*. If *The Pound Era* is a symphony, these are string quartets. There are enough insights in them to fuel a dozen associate professors for a year. Hugh wrote them while driving his children to school. In those heroic days he typed, making carbons. He'd lucked onto a ton of typing paper at a warehouse clearance.

Inside his mastery of a critical technique was a sensibility of great chromatic range. His sense of humor delighted in the incongruous and ridiculous: "O to be a dean, and ride in triumph through Periphrasis!" The other end of the spectrum was rage: at incompetence, slipshod scholarship, the bogus. Wound up about Bloomsbury, Yale, or the California legislature, he could be as eloquent as Swift or Mencken. He glared at Deconstruction and Theory.

His telephone calls about specifics were for vital information he thought I might have: the sonnet Wordsworth wrote about prehistoric cave-painting, the Greek for Jocasta's brooch, the likelihood that Jesus's having been a carpenter is an assumption, as

teknon meant practically any trade (mason, tile-layer, smith).

Hugh's prose remains the envy of everybody who has ever tried to write. It is elegant in its hard simplicity, in its diction, and in its adherence to tradition. It modulated from book to book. The compact density of his first Joyce book gave way to the fluid periods of *The Pound Era*. The Beckett book is written in Beckett. In later books he took to hiding perfectly invisible poems inside the prose: a Yeatsian sonnet, a limerick, a lively lyric in the book about Bugs Bunny and the Roadrunner. This last sticks out; only the dullest reader could miss it. The others are discreetly hidden, and yet they are there. I have a feeling that most of Hugh's prose is on two levels. The upper one is as clear and forthright as Hazlitt; the second one is Hugh talking to himself more intelligently than he is willing to share with a half-literate public. He spent years teach-

ing illiterate students, and did not recognize a high degree of literacy in public print of any sort. Not even Bill Buckley escaped his censure. Only Christian charity allowed him to say a good word about my own.

The writers he chose to explicate are not a phalanx. Wyndham Lewis ("Tom Eliot doesn't come around *here* disguised as Westminster Abbey!") had alienated everybody by the time Hugh met him. Beckett had despised Pound for years; Eliot kept his own counsel; Pound alone was accessible, and Hugh emulated him in taking people as they were, thinking for himself, and observing keenly. Hugh could play billiards with Beckett and savor cheese with Eliot in a London club. He had a suit made by Eliot's tailor ("Nothing ever *quite* in excess, Mr. Eliot") and a pair of shoes by Yeats's cobbler. I have seen William Carlos Williams removing passages from the proofs of *Paterson*. "Hugh Kenner says they don't fit."

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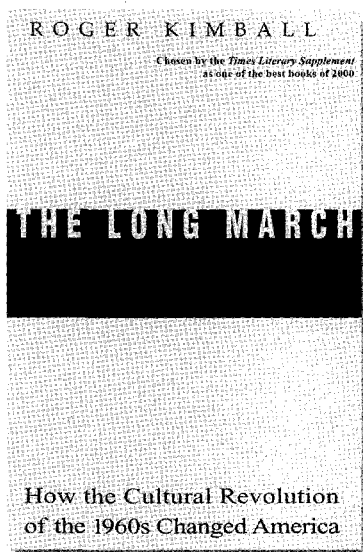
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